KUNMANGGUR, LEGEND AND LEADERSHIP

A STUDY OF INDIGENOUS LEADERSHIP AND SUCCESSION FOCUSING ON THE NORTHWEST REGION OF THE NORTHERN TERRITORY OF AUSTRALIA

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Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Charles Darwin University
2009
Declaration

This is to certify that this thesis comprises only my original work towards the Ph.D., except where indicated, that due acknowledgement has been made in the text to all other materials used, and that this thesis is less than 100,000 words in length excluding Figures, Tables and Appendices.

Bill Ivory
2009
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The Port Keats people and their leaders are amongst the most resolute, humble, proud, and resilient groups I have ever met. These characteristics have enabled them to meet all challenges so far and will assist them as they go forth. I hope that this thesis may provide a better understanding of these people, their culture and their determination to be rightfully recognised as Australian leaders.
Abstract

This thesis explores how Indigenous leadership in Australia is constructed and maintained. Through an analysis of institutionalised forms of leadership, it unwraps how hunter-gatherer type leadership is interpreted from a Western perspective. Such interpretation has been problematic and recent political events in Australia have once again, challenged the authenticity and resilience of Indigenous leadership.

By utilising a case study of the Port Keats region, the people and its history, the thesis investigates how Indigenous people have recast their mental constructs in order to perceive, interpret and relate to contemporary political, social and economic issues. It examines and describes the way that Indigenous people have created social realities that enable intercultural engagement and the ability to get things done. Detailed individual and group accounts of lives and events augment and enhance such analysis. The adjustments made by Indigenous people have been an ongoing process transpiring since first contact and acted out in various forms, including resistance and hostility. I describe a leadership model based on nodal and networked foundations and deference to others. I argue that the opportunity to understand, interact and engage positively with Indigenous leadership forms stands firm, and I propose a heuristic framework that may aid and assist such ongoing comprehension, understanding and mutual interdependence.
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Terms and Spelling

For reason of cultural sensitivity, I have in some instances referred to people in the community only with their initials. In other instances, people have requested and given approval for their full name to be used, and for their achievements to be formally recognised.

In some instances I use the term ‘Indigenous’ and in others ‘Aboriginal’. Generally, ‘Indigenous’ is used in the broader context of the Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islanders of Australia and when describing international situations, and ‘Aboriginal’ when I am referring exclusively to the Aboriginal people of Australia.

At the request of community leaders, I use the term ‘youth groups’ rather than ‘gangs’ when describing the youth structures within Wadeye.

Names of places and terms used in the respective Indigenous language, except language-group names, are given in *Italics*. There is considerable variation in the spelling of Murrinh-patha and other language and dialect words from the Port Keats region. In order to maintain consistency in this document, I use the spelling of Dixon (2002) for languages of the region and Chester and Lyn Street’s (1987; 1989; 2008) Murrinh-patha dictionary publications, for most Murrinh-patha words. Alberto Furlan (2005) also used their spelling style. Local leaders, during the establishment of the Thamarrurr Council, used a particular style when spelling the names of their clan groups and their age-categories, and while the spelling in most cases is the same as the Streets, in some cases, it

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1 This list reflects words that are used more commonly in this text than others. Words and terms not here are explained in footnotes.
differs and I defer to the local spelling. On occasions, I use words from other languages that the Streets have not listed, and in these cases, I use the spelling of Alan Marett and Linda Barwick. When I reference Professor W.E.H Stanner, for example with the word for the Rainbow Serpent Kunmanggur in the title of this thesis, I use his spelling. Likewise, with words referenced in the text from A. and J. Falkenberg, I use their spelling. I thank Tobias Nganbe, Dominic McCormack, and Lysbeth Ford for their advice and assistance with regard to these matters.

**Murrinh-patha and Other Words**

- **darrikardu** – ‘countryman’; person from same country
- **Kanamkek** – rainbow; the Rainbow Serpent
- **kangathi** – mother’s country
- **kardu** – human beings (Aboriginal only)
- **kardu pule** – senior clan member; ‘like a manager’; brother; ‘jungai’; ‘main boss’; ‘main manager’; sometimes used by wife to address husband
- **kardu wakal** – small spiritual people
- **kirrmarn** – leader of ceremony; knowledgeable person of Law
- **Kukpi** – black-nose carpet snake
- **Kunmanggur** – the Rainbow Serpent; dreamtime creator; ‘rainbow animal’; spiritual being; also spelt Kunmangkurr
- **malakumbara** – a person (usually brother-in-law) who ‘looks after’ initiate
- **mayern** – sorcerer
- **murrinh** – language
- **Muthingka** – old woman; sacred object
- **nanthi kulu; merbok; wurnan** – ceremonial trade exchange
- **nangkun** – Wife’s brother and husband’s brother are both referred to by this term
- **ngakumarl** – totem
- **ngalander** – male leader usually older than 60; considered an ‘old man’
- **ngarrithngarrith** – spirit children
- **ngatan** – clan totem
- **ngepan** – spirit
- **nginikat** – look after
- **ngugumingki** – totemic site; ‘dreaming’ place
- **ngurdarnu** – ceremony ground
- **Nugemanh** – superior spiritual being
- **Punh** – ceremony; ceremony initiate
- **Thamarrurr** – traditional system of governance
- **thangku** – the ‘wet season’
- **thempith** – circumcised boy
thirmumuk – food eaten during Punh ceremony
thiwidth – a ‘fun song’; non-serious talk during ceremony
wadhi – person who marries incorrectly
Yek – clan grouping

Age-categories (Male) – approximate

Kardu wakal – birth to 3 years
Kardu mamai – 3 to 5/6
Kardu lamatingu – 5/6 to 9
Kardu tjambitj – 9 to 12
Kardu kigai – 12 to 17
Kardu kake – 18 to 40
Kardu ngalander – old man, usually over 60
Kardu pulen pulen – very old, 80+

Language groups

Emmi
Magati-ge
Marri Amu
Marri Ngarr
Marritjevin
Menhthe
Murrinh-patha
Ngan.gimerri
Ngan.gi-kurunggurr
Ngan.gi-tjemerri
Ngan.gi-wumeri

Song Genres

Wangga
Dhanba
Wurthirri
Malkarrin
Lirrga
Moiety Groups

*Karrthin* – Chicken-hawk
*Tiwungku* – Eagle-hawk
Introduction

This dissertation is about Indigenous leadership. It is based on data collected at the township of Wadeye and surrounding areas generally known as Port Keats in the northwest region of the Northern Territory (NT) of Australia (see Map 1A). The ethnography in the thesis is principally concerned with the Murrinh-patha, Marri Ngarr, Marritjevin, Marri Amu, Magati-ge, Menhthe, Ngan.gi-tjemerri, Ngan.gi-wumeri, Ngan.gi-kurunggurr, Emmi and Ngan.gimerri speaking people of Port Keats focusing on their constructions and perceptions of leaders, and the role of leadership in their lives. My fieldwork was conducted intensively during the period 2002 to 2006. Indigenous Australians have undergone many government policy experiments since first colonisation, and this period was again a time of extreme change and consequent pressure for local people.

The community swept to prominence in the course of my research as it was the scene of a Council of Australian Government’s (COAG) ‘trial’ in the Northern Territory, one of only eight in Australia and the subject of testing new NT Government policy frameworks for local governance. This concerted policy intervention added many challenges to the research data collection, whilst adding another dimension for anthropological inquiry. There are high levels of intercultural engagement between Port Keats people and Federal and State bureaucrats and politicians documented throughout the study.
Map 1A: Showing the Port Keats area and surrounds in the Northwest of the Northern Territory, Australia

This map was produced by S. Garling and B. Ivory utilising the map database format of the Northern Territory Government. It was originally published in Ivory 2008.
Wadeye is the largest predominantly Aboriginal populated township in the Northern Territory. I first had contact with the area as a field officer for the Department of Aboriginal Affairs in 1978 and this provided an introduction to the people once again when I was posted there as a community development officer in 2002. I based my honours thesis on the study of the emergence of a particular youth subculture there and this research facilitated my interest in further research, particularly in the field of leadership.

When conducting research, I also worked principally for the Northern Territory government. This was either in full or part-time roles as a development officer. Where possible, I also spent most of my ‘holidays’ on site. I resided in various dwellings depending on what was available in a very over-crowded community and occasionally camped with Aboriginal landowners on their estates. I seized on any occasion to collect data and make observations.

**The Research Problem**

The problematic of this thesis is the conceptual structure and social reality of the Murrinh-patha view of leadership in the context of the post-colonial society that is Wadeye today. Whilst current opinion suggests that Indigenous leadership is fluid, consensus-based, collective and not able to effectively match with contemporary society, things are nevertheless achieved. The question is why; and how?

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3 I was employed by the Northern Territory Government from 1980 onwards as a project officer. Previously I had worked for the Commonwealth Government as a community adviser and field officer in Aboriginal communities.
How power is acquired, distributed, wielded and sustained by individuals and groups is a precondition for effective governance at all levels of social organisation, and is typically complex. How systems of governance throughout the social space of post-colonial Australia interact with each other displays even greater complexity. This complexity has long been evident in Indigenous Australian societies, to the extent that for many observers it has remained invisible, unintelligible and has thwarted attempts at cogent analysis.

This thesis takes the complexity of Indigenous leadership and governance seriously and, through the analysis of ethnographic evidence, attempts to build a leadership model and useable heuristic that encompasses its many elements and can be used to explain how complex systems produce order, action and outcomes.

There is a plethora of literature on leadership in Western society. Many of the theorists disagree on what it looks like, whom it affects and how it is mobilised or maintained. Debate ensues about who are leaders and followers and their qualities, persona and attributes. From first contact in Australia, colonisers and other commentators generally agreed that in fact Aboriginal people did not have leadership, let alone have any of the institutional forms of government, law or justice that were then seen as denoting the apex of social evolution. Rather, in an era of enlightenment rationality, Indigenous society was characterised as poor and brutish; a debased form of anarchy where the strong preyed on the weak, and power was exercised violently and oppressively. Interestingly though, right from the start of contact, records document the British and others negotiating and interacting with key individuals to ‘get things done.’ Some individuals were given ‘King’, ‘Queen’, or ‘Chief’ plates by colonists
and others to make them more ‘visible’ to European eyes and to indicate to other Aboriginal people that those people endowed with the titles, had European endorsement.

Anthropologists have also wrestled with the conceptual and social complexity of Indigenous leadership. Most have argued about the primacy of ‘difference’; that if Indigenous leadership did exist it was minimal and bore little resemblance to Western notions and forms. It was fragmented they said, spontaneous and ill-defined, subject to negotiation in every context. The emphasis on the hyper-fluidity of Indigenous Australian leadership begs the question of how information, needs and communication are translated into social action. How are things done at the collective level? Fred Myers (1976: 556) was one of a later generation of anthropologists who argued that Indigenous groups, in his case the Pintubi, whilst being intensely egalitarian, had a system of politics, well-developed social organisation, generational succession, and a form of authority and hierarchy founded on the need to ‘look after’ those coming up. The model of social relations he described extended to a political theory that enabled a constrained form of interaction with non-Indigenous people and their hierarchy.

A problem identified by Myers (1976: 547) was that the Pintubi impose on ‘change and fluctuation an image of permanence and continuity’. This enabled them to adapt to the early incursions of the colonial frontier. However, he considered it an ill fit, only partly adaptive and resulting in frustration on both sides. Furthermore, in ‘their last attempt … to fit change to the forms of permanence’ Myers (1976: 556) concluded that, ‘the Pintubi are likely to fail’. Myers

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4 Berndt and Berndt (1969: 150) used the term gawonan as a leader who ‘looks after’, ‘sees to’ or ‘cares for’ others.
appears to be prophesising the demise of Pintubi leaders and leadership under the harsh reality of rapid change and incommensurable worldviews.

Myers, like other anthropologists before and after him, identified the role of key individuals in Indigenous post-colonial social life. Berndt and Berndt (1969) wrote about leadership based on religious authority, and Maddock (1972) referred to authority exercised in the domain of religion. Burridge (1973: 73) observed ‘shrewd men’ who balanced politics, economics and social affairs. Tonkinson (1974: 83) in the Western Desert detailed situationally defined ‘head bosses’ where authority was diffused.

Von Sturmer (1978: 246) researching in Cape York, described a ‘big men’ or ‘bosses’ situation where men were able to accumulate political power through reputation and transaction.\(^5\) Kolig (1981) wrote about a religious leader that he described as having ‘great man’ status in the Kimberley and John Bern (1979: 125) in Southeast Arnhem Land describes a ‘dominant category’ of mature men whose authority may operate not only in the ritual sphere, but often also in the secular. Hiatt (1986) argued that Indigenous communities ‘lack enduring hierarchies of authority’ however, ‘individuals, especially senior males, compete for control of scarce natural and metaphysical resources in order to gain or enhance reputations as ceremonial big men; and that, collectively, senior males exercise a degree of domination over junior males and females’. Bell (1983: 23) from a Central Australia perspective, argued that it was not just a man’s world that women also were able to maintain ‘gender-specific power bases’. Trigger (1992: 114) researching in Doomadgee observed ‘experts’ both men and

\(^5\) Sahlins (1963) originally used the term ‘big-man’ when referring to powerful men in Melanesia and Polynesia. The term was later either spelt ‘big man’ or ‘big-man’ and I have used the spelling as used by each particular author.
women. Sutton (1998: 11) posits that in essence there are ‘kinship-based institutions and authority roles’ with ‘big men’ who maintain ‘careers’. Further perspectives are identified in Table 1C (page 53).

However, none of these characteristics or insights have been able to encompass, in a useable heuristic, the many complex elements of leadership mentioned in the Australian literature to date. Moreover, there is limited current ethnography after Myers, which describes the processes and conditions of Indigenous leadership in the contemporary Australian state. In fact, a commonly debated assumption, by some, has remained the image of ‘two worlds’ (Indigenous and non-Indigenous) that positions Indigenous leadership in a no-mans land where their authority and agency is diminished in both worlds (Merlan 1998; Martin 2003; Holcombe 2004; Austin-Broos 1996, 2008). This perspective may even further proliferate extreme views such as contemporary historian Windshuttle (2002: 102) who argues, ‘the Tasmanian Aborigines showed no evidence of anything that deserved the name of political skills at all’.

Even fewer anthropological analyses have subsequently been able to address Myers’ prophecy: Has Indigenous leadership failed to stand the test of rapid change when competing epistemologies meet? Has the incommensurability of the concepts of leadership upon which Indigenous and western systems of governance are based, and the inherently unequal power associated with those domains in the post-colonial Australian state, meant that Indigenous leaders can no longer produce the grounds for their own legitimacy? If leaders and leadership
are failing, how does social action at different levels of aggregation take place; how do things continue to be done, especially under conditions of increasing intervention by the State?

My research found quite a contrary situation. Aboriginal people in the Port Keats region are getting things done. Groups are taking collective active at various scales. Some people are taking the lead and others are following. Occasionally the leadership roles are changed depending on the situation. Ceremony is being held. Councils and committees are forming, meeting and mobilising resources. Not every leader is a ‘big-man’ in the popular mainstream personification of Indigenous leadership; the majority of leaders are in fact quiet unassuming people who just get on and do their job with a great sense of humility.

My ethnographic research has found not only that things are being done, but also leaders are apparent, recognised by their own people and are generating outcomes. They are embattled in many instances and have been transformed in others. In some cases, disenfranchised and angry youths have formed group associations with leaders of their own, but with links based on clan association and kin alliance. In other cases, women have gathered collectively under the direction of senior female leaders to implement particular initiatives close to their hearts. This thesis will not only examine where leadership prospers but where it falters and where it diverges. In this milieu, politicians, bureaucrats, resource developers, and other external parties are still engaged and negotiated with, and increasingly held accountable for their interventions and proposals.
The thesis presents detailed ethnographic evidence to describe a model of Indigenous leadership and agency at Port Keats that encompasses complex social and political realities, which enables us to explain, ‘how things happen’, and which encompasses an intercultural domain of leadership. The model developed is of a leadership system that is ‘outcome generating’ and is able to explain many of the disparate conceptual and social elements that anthropologists have described in the past. The model explores the bases of leadership at Port Keats, how it is nurtured, how it responds to crisis, and how all of this has changed over time. It is a system that values individual opinion, has permanence and continuity, fosters consensus and collective action, whilst being founded within a structure that has the outward appearance of having changed little within living memory.

**Methodology**

The methodology used during my research is predominantly based on an applied anthropological approach. It was not just about taking knowledge as we anthropologists are often accused of, and sometimes arguably do. I utilised an interactive process that encouraged discussion, intimate engagement and sharing of experiences. These workshops, discussions, camping trips and mapping exercises have also provided information, knowledge, and strategic options back to the people. In the process, I have investigated the questions raised by the following means:

- interviews with individuals and groups;
- participant observation of daily events and interaction between people;
- the mapping with informants of sites and subsequently clan estates;
- recording oral life histories of leaders;
• recording the stories and myths of the people and attending ceremony;
• gaining the views of varied age groups (older, middle-aged, and younger);
• examining government structures, by observation and through literature, in Australia and overseas;
• examining, observing, documenting and participating at times in governance processes; and
• assisting with the conduct of workshops primarily focused on people development.

An important caveat is that data collection was primarily with men and this thesis is primarily about male leadership. I made this decision early in the research phase mainly because of the sheer size of the ethnographic and gender problematic, and because as a male I have greater access to this population. The men were keen to present me with information and knowledge, sometimes of a sacred nature, and initially I felt obliged because of this to focus my efforts on the male domain. However, over the years, my relationships and trust with the women were built on substantially, and often groups of knowledgeable women would take me out on to country, with the approval of the men. The women themselves were not prepared to, and I did not expect them to, discuss their own relevant ritual information relevant to female rites of passage. Nevertheless, I regularly met with individuals and groups of women to inform them of the research I was doing. On occasions, I recorded their life-stories. I was also able to gather from them broad societal structure information, for instance, about Aboriginal terms for age groups (and categorisation methods).
It should be noted that the median age of death in the broader region is 46 years.\(^6\) The mortality rate for men for men is higher than the women and many of the women live into their 70s and 80s. The women were extremely interested in what I was doing and their participation at times was invaluable because of their knowledge of the landscape in all its forms. It was relevant, I believe, to their perception of the appropriate balance of power in their area. They often expressed, in various ways, a sentiment that if they were to achieve their own goals, which were often focused on family, the self-esteem of the men had to be considered and commensurate. Thus, my data and conclusions in this light are only partial and provide an opportunity for further research in this field.

The collection of life histories occurred in various forums. On occasions, it might be at someone’s house, under a tree, with the one person or groups of people. At other times it might be in an office setting. Often I used mediums such as old photographs to stimulate discussion and memories. Sometimes I gathered genealogical information that once again stimulated interest. The use of photographs, particularly of deceased persons, was discussed at length. The leaders gave their approval for such photographs to be used during the research and in the thesis document. The photographs, they advise, are an important part of their history that should be revealed to future generations.

I decided, in terms of investigating past forms of life progression, to collect life histories of a number of senior men. Later this was extended to middle-aged and younger males. Most of the older, senior men had not only lived a more traditional type of subsistence, but often also

\(^6\) Overall Aboriginal death rates in the broader Daly River region are four times higher than the total non-Aboriginal population of the Northern Territory (Taylor and Stanley 2005: 7).
worked for the Church, the pastoral industry, and other sorts of employment. The narratives were recorded in notebooks. I also took many photographs that were used to stimulate conversation with individuals and in workshops. The local council viewed the work as essential to the community and either reimbursed my informants by paying them a salary, or made appropriate payments for services rendered. I sometimes reimbursed people with money or other in-kind services, such as a hunting trip, for their participation. I chose the informants by attempting to gain a cross-sectional representation of language, clan, and ceremonial groups. The informants were exceptionally cooperative as well as keen to be part of a process that I believe, was generally seen as positive. The issue of photographs was discussed during the process and the leaders involved indicated that, if viewed with discretion and used in consultation with living relatives, then photographs of deceased persons could be included in the thesis as a record of their achievements. They also said that it was important ‘for the young fellas’ that their history is properly recorded.

I was particularly interested in documenting progression through life as marked by ceremonial stages and events. This involved questioning many people about information such as life-groups and how one progressed from one to the other. I was also invited on six occasions, and accepted, to attend various associated rituals. On most occasions, I was allowed to make notes and sometimes to photograph the performers. These ceremonies ranged from the initial ritual of initiation for young men, through to the highest form of revelation for men. Men, from the relatively young through to the oldest, went out of their way to inform me throughout the process. The older men had worked during the 1950s and 1960s with eminent anthropologist William Stanner and often explained to the others, the role of the anthropologist. Most men
were very keen for information to be recorded and would often chastise me if I were not
making notes. Much of Stanner’s and other observer’s records are preserved at the Australian
Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) and at Wadeye in a
cultural museum with ready access to approved residents, so there was no antipathy in this
regard.

After some time, I was able to best gauge the most appropriate times to question informants.
Often this was early morning when groups of older men would gather at the local office. With
individuals, I would often visit their house late in the afternoon as it became cooler and sit
under a tree. As the ‘men’s centre’ developed, this was used more and more for formal
meetings and workshops and it became an increasingly valuable source of information. At
this centre, I would sometimes utilise power point or a white board to stimulate discussion.
Often they would use the whiteboard to explain to me what their point was. The discussions
were primarily in the local language and because I could only follow key words or phases, it
was usually translated later by local people conversant in both English and the relevant
language.

I would often plot the broad direction of my questioning, prior to discussions, in an attempt to
focus on the main aims of the thesis. The informants would sometimes willingly follow this
path, but on occasions take me on a journey of their own volition. In a roundabout way my
questions were answered. On one occasion, during an informal discussion, an informant
became so excited he drove ‘home’ to his outstation, and returned about an hour later with his

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7 The ‘men’s centre’ was a concept and a group of people rather than a place and it often convened, as a forum,
outside of Wadeye, the main community. Those participating varied.
clan’s genealogy documented by a previous anthropologist, to illustrate a point he was making.

Due to the large number of groups and sub-groups, and the large population congregated in one community, it was inevitable that a major focus of many interactions at Port Keats was in the form of disputes. By observing such interaction, and usually dispute resolution (albeit usually temporarily), I was able to gauge an understanding of internal politics and leadership in the region. This, of course, had to be conducted as diplomatically as possible. It became easier as time progressed, as I believe people often saw me as a neutral medium in which they could move to resolve some of the disputes. I sometimes assisted, albeit reluctantly on most occasions, to act as an intermediary.

I made numerous trips (over 50) with groups of men, and women, to their clan estates. They informed me about the mythology of country as we drove along and reminisced about events that had taken place. Often we then held a formal meeting and discussed issues relevant to the day. On occasions, we mapped boundaries of clan estates. People invariably were noticeably more comfortable and conversant on their own country. This phenomenon related to all age groups, young and old, male and female.

It would be fair to say that I did not align myself with any particular individual or group. This was purposeful on my part, as I wanted to be able to interact with as wide a range of groups as possible. I had certain ‘favorites’ in terms of informants, but made deliberate moves to talk as widely as possible. I believe that the people appreciated this because it did not place them in
awkward reciprocal type situations. This probably reflects the fact that I was a government officer and expected to work in this way. It made me quite different from other ‘freelance’ anthropologists.

My rationale was to record information and then ‘give it back’ to the community. By continually making this clear, it defined our relationship from the start and assisted in creating competent and positive opportunities. In the long term, what has gone back will optimistically assist them to resolve some of their own dilemmas as their society continues to change.

The ethnography leads to the development of a conceptual model of the leadership structure and system that exists in the Port Keats region. Informed by this model and the evidence, I also work, toward a heuristic framework that may assist in analysing Indigenous leadership systems with possible extension and usage in other areas.

Ethical approval number H04068 for my research was granted by the Charles Darwin University (CDU) Human Research Ethics Committee.

**Aims of the Study**

The thesis outlines the problematic of the conceptual structure and social reality of the *Thamarrurr* view of leadership\(^8\) in the context of the post-colonial society, and builds its analysis of the ethnographic evidence in the following way.

\(^{8}\) *Thamarrurr* is a conceptualisation of governance in the Port Keats region. It will be elaborated further in this thesis.
In this Introduction, I pose the research question and problem of how Aboriginal people of the Port Keats region conceptualise leadership today. How are things done? How do they construct and structure a social reality that enables them to operate in an intercultural sense? Who gets things happening and why, particularly in the context of major changes across Australia?

My hypothesis is that the people have been able to re-cast their mental construct of the world in order to survive and adapt. This re-casting has incorporated the identification of middle-aged leaders and negotiators who operate within the non-Indigenous domain. Such individuals are identified early and embark on a ‘training’ regime that is overseen by more senior leaders. I will attempt to illustrate how a guiding mental construct and model of social relations provides a theory of political engagement of how Indigenous people interpret and organise their on-going engagement.

This approach, I will argue, will provide the most theoretically useful way to look at the issue of leadership. This chapter will outline how I structured my research and applied it to my hypothesis. This will be put in context of current anthropological conclusions.

Chapter One will investigate the wider view of leadership both at an international and national level. It will analyse the anthropological ‘picture’ of how things are achieved and the associated views of leadership, by way of a literature review. The chapter will outline the current position and then contrast the main dimensions and key findings. Further, I will review the literature and anthropological approaches to Indigenous leadership focusing on hunter-
gatherer type societies. Whilst allowing for the fact that Australian perspectives have often been guided by more global historical influences such as enlightenment and colonisation, I will argue that policies of government, ranging from extermination to self-determination, have influenced how the dominant society perceives and determines Indigenous leadership. Opinions on whether there is leadership and governance vary and I will demonstrate that despite an extensive analysis by the academy, there still are significant inadequacies in terms of what is currently understood about the subject in Indigenous Australia.

This leads to the primary case study of Wadeye. In order to contextualise the social and political environment in which my research was conducted, I need to articulate where the Port Keats people have come from, where they are at today and why. Hence Chapter Two explores the cultural and social landscape and how history has brought change and fluctuation to the region and the people. I explore the probable implications of population decimation due to disease even before first real contacts between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people were made in the region. I detail recorded first contacts with explorers and other venturers as these intrusions provided the people with further significant challenges to their leadership structure. I provide an account of what anthropologists such as Stanner and the Falkenbergs found during the 1930s through to the 1970s. These accounts provide a template for an analysis of, and comparison with, what I found from my own ethnography, including the observation of nodal leadership. Considerable insight is provided into cultural practices including how the young are nurtured to become leaders.
In order to understand the social structure, I conducted a comprehensive analysis of the people and their region. Elements of the culture such as language, alliances (social, political and economic), kinship and ceremony are scrutinised in a structural sense to provide a configuration of how relationships work. Objectified Indigenous Law is indoctrinated by rites of passage, a system of ‘growing up’ the young, and a process and responsibility for ‘looking after’ others that follows from one generation to the next. Each individual experiences the Law and this leads to a particular model of hierarchy and authority that operates in the region and beyond. This background is necessary so that it is possible to present what the Murrinh-patha and other groups have done in respect to their systems of leadership and how they have survived as entities.

Chapter Three will introduce examples of what leadership looked like from the time of colonisation in the wider region, the 1870s, until mid-1930s. It will examine how leadership functions within history and when the external affects a society. Examples are analysed of how legendary leaders such as Nemarluk and the Red Band of Warriors in the 1930s responded to challenges to their leadership networks and status. These examples will illustrate how local leaders attracted significant attention, notoriety, and consideration. By so-called ‘wild’ and ‘untamed’ behaviour, they attracted resources that, at the time, might not otherwise have been forthcoming. The analysis proposes that, at this time, a form of nodal leadership and cooperative action can be identified, and later in the thesis, I will demonstrate that this phenomenon exists and continues to evolve today.
Subsequently, the arrival of the mission in 1935 brought further impacts on local and regional leadership and these will be analysed in Chapter Four. The ethnography will be enhanced with individual accounts of how leaders responded and forged linkages. The individuals analysed are referred to as ‘the elderly’ and they represent the most senior type of leadership that emerged generally from the period 1935–1969. This chapter will elaborate on a concept of ‘going away’ that enabled individuals to adapt and extend their networks and power base, and arguably prosper at a time when intercultural conditions in the Northern Territory were very harsh.

The chapter will contrast individual stories and key events and describe how people engaged with the colonial order. These stories are accounts of life on cattle stations, crocodile shooting, enlisting in the armed services, or engaging in other forms of work. They are about moving to other parts of Northern Australia, or, going south, for schooling. I will then report on the confusion that followed this era as people ‘came back’ to a welfare and paternalistic system of governance. I will attempt to explain the wider network building that leaders engaged in, and how this realigned and strengthened the nodes of authority and leadership. I will elaborate on regional rites of passage and metaphorical ‘initiation’ into the wider world, with visual supplementation by diagrams.

Chapter Five will focus on the male leadership group often referred to as the ‘middle-aged’ leaders who are generally aged 40 years and older. It considers the important changes brought to their lives emanating from the so called welfare (1960s) to self-determination (1970s) eras. It will point out how the mission’s role changed, how the first council (Kardu Numida
Incorporated) evolved, and how this dual system of governance eventually collapsed. I will speculate on why this occurred and speculate on how it contradicted and struggled to fit with the nodal, networked and consensus-based society. I will describe how this state of affairs erupted into confusion and frustration that eventually resulted in disturbances and riots that required ‘traditional’ peacekeeping and grievance ‘burying’ (mulunu) measures to be implemented, and how Northern Territory Government ministers and their officers were part of this process. The chapter will describe how the Port Keats leaders began to readjust and develop a ‘new approach’ based on Indigenous foundation governance principles in order to move forward.

Chapter Five will, with the assistance of personal accounts, outline and interpret the experiences and adaptations of these people within an ever-changing environment. It will detail the re-emergence of a seemingly ‘new’ governance system that the Aboriginal leaders fostered which in fact was based on a cultural governance concept known as Thamarrurr or method of resolving issues. It will present evidence of people building on and reinforcing the conceptual nodal, networked society. The impact of a Council of Australian Governments (COAG) ‘trial’ process will be examined. It will also detail the impact of the Federal Coalition Government of John Howard’s ‘practical intervention’ policy and the recent move toward amalgamated regional local government bodies by the Northern Territory government. Most importantly, it will explore the implications for Thamarrurr and local leadership from these changes.
Chapter Six examines a third, and emerging form of leadership; that of the younger generational alliances. The re-configuration of these alliances in some cases into ‘gangs’ will be analysed, as will the challenges that evolved for all concerned. It will pay attention to how these youth groups have emerged, their structure, how they operate, and their motivations. It will examine how the other levels of leadership have manoeuvred in order to recognise and engage with the ‘threat’ (and potential opportunity) of this age grouping. Once again, the senior and middle-aged leadership has transformed its own action-processes, and the concept of ‘going back to country’ emerged presenting positive alternatives of engagement. The question will be explored of how and why the leadership ‘devised’ such measures. Examination will be given to the re-grouping, decision-making, and reactionary-type processes that occurred.

The Conclusion presents a theoretical model that enables the leadership schemata within the Port Keats region to be more fully described and understood. It also moves toward the development of a conceptual analytical framework to describe, analyse, model, and compare other Indigenous leadership forms in Australia. By proposing such theoretical and conceptual mechanisms, I argue that there may be possibilities for both cultures to engage and negotiate more meaningful and workable intercultural engagements. The Conclusion will deduce how individual agency gets things happening. By analysing and interpreting the data, I will propose a model of leadership that describes Indigenous leadership at Port Keats in the following ways:

- durable, resilient, and adaptive;
• developed within regional parameters, but able to be extended in some instances depending on individual leadership traits;
• negotiable (in some circumstances) but generally constant and knowledgeable (non-negotiable) in others;
• emphatic on individual decision-making but contained within community-bound contexts;
• experience-accumulative and enhanced with specific personality traits;
• recognises the existence of ‘big-men’ but within a social network that influences and focuses activities primarily on immediate and extended family benefits and also on broader community well-being. It also describes the mechanisms that prevent domination by ‘out of control’ leaders;
• identifies ‘astute-men’ and ‘clever-men’ within the system who utilise ‘thick’ networks based on generosity and consideration of others to apply a responsible form of leadership;
• identifies nodal leadership that draws together history and networks to get things done; and
• identifies a system of deference that provides the basis for leadership.

This model subscribes to networked and nodal leadership schemata that is based on a system of deferment. Continuity, as a mental construct and as coping mechanism is characterised as foundational using the existing Indigenous paradigm, but as able to incorporate changes that better enable a working model of understanding and engagement. The thesis will then propose
a heuristic research framework that may be used for research in other Indigenous situations when examining leadership.

This thesis will provide a further explanation of how Indigenous leadership operates and will build on the substantial work done by anthropologists such as Fred Myers and others. The dissertation makes a contribution to the anthropology of Indigenous Australians by providing a theoretical framework which will enable questions about leadership to be addressed, not just at Port Keats but possibly with broad relevance in other parts of Australia.
Chapter One

Leadership: A Concept in Search of Meaning

Thirty years ago, Fred Myers (1976) produced his renowned dissertation on the general problem of the individual in Pintubi society. From his research, Myers (1976: 556) concluded, that the Pintubi were likely to fail in their attempts ‘to fit change to the forms of permanence’ because ‘they are unable, by the very nature of their cosmological view, to accord social consensus to their own ideas’. Despite attempts to ‘order and integrate’ (Myers 1976: 17), the Pintubi model of authority, he argued, was ‘inappropriate to their dealings with Europeans’ (Myers 1976: 556).

Notwithstanding Myers’s thesis Indigenous people appear to continue to engage, successfully or otherwise, with the wider society, and generally get things done within their communities. Donald Thomson (1949: 33–34) had pondered this in the 1930s when researching Aboriginal people of Eastern Arnhem Land. He enquired:

> What are the drives, the incentives, which lie behind all this organisation? Why does it move so smoothly, and what induces these
people to work hard, so willingly, without any apparent direction, control or authority?

Almost 80 years later, things continue to ‘get done’ despite the fact that Indigenous Australians are often under siege from various quarters, including politicians and the media. For instance, Mick Dodson (2009: 4), 2009 Australian of the Year, commented how he often sees ‘countrymen ... despite a whole lot of obstacles, still manage to succeed’. However, a Northern Territory News (NT News) editorial (2006), in response to alleged dysfunctional behaviour issues on Indigenous communities, posed the question, ‘Where are the Indigenous leaders?’ This thesis argues that such latter discourse can be unconstructive and perpetuates misunderstanding between both Indigenous and non-Indigenous interests. The thesis examines the widely held view (Hirst 2007; Howard and Brough 2007) that Indigenous society is one with weak and unsustainable leadership and unravells present-day Indigenous leadership, succession and decision-making processes by focussing on a specific Aboriginal community.

The purpose of this chapter is to outline and discuss the existing discourse about leadership, identify some of its constructs and to situate the research. In order to do this, it is necessary to consider wider Western interpretations of leadership and their implications, as well as the anthropological translations. The method used, will be a combination of analysis of the literature on leadership, examination of hunter-gatherer research, exploration of historical evidence of leadership encounters and interpretations, and this leads to an evaluation of anthropological descriptions. This explication of the concept of leadership and how it has been
construed in Australia will provide the base for, in later chapters, a description and analysis of the ethnography conducted in the Port Keats region.

A key question for me in respect to my research on Indigenous leaders and leadership is, if there are, as suggested by some, conceptually ‘two worlds’ (Kolig 1972), a situation involving ‘two-laws’ (Maddock 1977; Williams 1987; Tonkinson 1988a; Austin-Broos 1996) or an ‘intercultural’ milieu (Merlan 1998; Hinkson 2005); how is it possible that many Indigenous people operate effectively in both? Conversely, why is it that some do not? Is there an ‘inappropriate’, as Myers (1976) predicted, authority relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal models? Is it a mismatched fit that somehow stumbles along and is ultimately destined to fail? To be effective, do Indigenous people have to have different leaders in each domain. Alternatively, has or can a process be developed that enables the perceived gulf to be bridged and the intercultural traversed, by innovative ways of governing and leading that recognise existing Indigenous structures and systems?

If somehow there is a form of cultural ‘fit’ (Cornell et al 2005: 5), ‘match’ (Begay, Cornell and Kalt 1998; Cornell 1993, 2002; Cornell and Begay 2003; Honouring Nations 2002, 2003) or practical recognition and accommodation that encompasses other elements, might things work even better? As Cornell and Kalt (2003: 16) argue, ‘People have to believe in them [institutions]’. Cultural legitimacy, whilst important, also has to be coupled with the ability to produce legitimate outcomes (Hunt and Smith 2006). I explore these critical questions throughout this thesis.
Perceptions of Australian Indigenous Leadership: Brass Plates and Great Men

In 2004, Gatjil Djerrkura, an eminent Indigenous Galpu leader, passed away. He was from Dhalinbuy in northeast Arnhem Land and had progressed through life to became the chairperson of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) and for a time arguably one of the most powerful Indigenous political voices in Australia. Some of his memorial notices (from both Indigenous and non-Indigenous sources) referred to Mr Djerrkura as ‘A Great Yolgnu Leader’, ‘A true Yolgnu leader’, ‘a Lawman and Statesman’, ‘A great leader and role model’ and so on (NT News 2004a). Was Mr Djerrkura a leader who had his feet in ‘both worlds’ and who had successfully straddled the so-called intercultural divide?

Another prominent leader, Galarrwuy Yunupingu, from the Gumatj group of northeastern Arnhem Land, resigned in the same year, after leading the Northern Land Council (NLC) for 24 years. How had he survived as the head of such a volatile quasi-political organisation that engaged directly with the Australian State for so long? Some of the non-Indigenous politicians and Chief Ministers that he had ‘grappled’ with over the years had long since departed, but he survived. No doubt he had fought not only battles within mainstream politics, but also perhaps amongst his own ranks at times. On occasions, both Djerrkura and Yunupingu had questioned the legitimacy or at least the logic of mainstream law. Why do many Australians perceive these men as being prominent and influential Indigenous leaders? How were they identified and appointed in the first place? Have leaders such as these men secured legitimacy in both worlds and if so, how?
In July 2004, prominent Indigenous spokesperson Patrick Dodson in a speech to the Cranlana Programme sponsored by the Myer Foundation in Melbourne, Australia, addressed the issue of equitable governance and appropriate and responsible leadership. He argued that one of the great strengths of Indigenous society has been ‘the fact that no one member of any tribe or group held absolute authority’. Problematically he also pointed out that in the past people who were not necessarily appropriately recognised leaders within their community had ‘brass plaques [placed] on their chests’ from time of colonisation and it was ‘announced forthwith that they were to be chiefs and kings’ (Dodson 2004: 11).

Dodson argued that Indigenous governance structures in Australia have not always been established in a positive sense. Often they are a result of ‘disputes or prolonged negotiation with governments’ (Dodson 2004: 11). Organisations created in this environment have battled on, attempting to represent their people in good faith. However, often they have lost contact with the laws and customs of the land. Governments, he argues, have propped them up as ‘the Aboriginal Leadership’ and expectations in many cases have been high (Dodson 2004: 11).

Dodson (2004: 11) explained that governments today are now enticing young spokespeople with status and recognition to become ‘the contemporary keepers of the brass plates’. He warns that Indigenous leadership should not be compromised at the expense of the sustenance of the languages, law and culture, and the Indigenous heritage. Importantly, he argues, ‘The same imperative that has driven the holders of the law and ceremony for millennia must be sustained if we are to avoid the suggestion that as a people we have been dispersed by the tides of time’ (Dodson 2004: 11). Dodson, I believe, is calling for Indigenous leadership that, while
being recognised in both worlds; is developed sequentially, and has appropriate skills, capacity and recognition whilst retaining its legitimate foundations within a distinctly Indigenous worldview.

**Literature Review**

Leadership is a common theme in current Australian society. We are constantly inundated with the subject of leadership, in all domains of our life whether it relates to politics, sport, religion, or work. Definitions abound and it is worthwhile exploring some of them. The Oxford dictionary defines leadership as being to ‘cause to go with one … by guiding or showing the way or by going in front’ (Oxford 1994: 865).

Heywood (2002: 425) defines leadership as ‘influence exerted over a larger group or body, or personal qualities that foster willing obedience in others’. Prominent writer on the topic, John Burns (1978: 18) argues that leadership:

… is exercised when persons with certain motives and purposes mobilize, in competition or conflict with others, institutional, political, psychological, and other resources so as to arouse, engage, and satisfy the motives of the followers.

Leadership has often been propounded as a ‘supreme political virtue’ and as the inevitable outcome of ‘irresistible and impersonal forces’ (Scruton 1996: 303). Some argue that it is a result of charisma (Weber 1947) but others reject attempts to explain it in terms of personal
characteristics and argue that it is more a relationship dependent on a social context.\(^9\) For example, some people may be leaders in one situation but not in others.

Reser and Sarros (2000: 6) and Bolden (2004) argue that theorists are still grappling with persuasive definitions of leadership. Various philosophers, leaders and other commentators have tried their hand. St. Augustine (2008: 1) in A. D. 387 advised aspiring leaders, ‘Do you wish to rise? Begin by descending. You plan a tower that will pierce the clouds? Lay first the foundation of humility’.

These interpretations allude to certain key features of leadership. The interpretations suggest that leaders, in order to appeal to a wider group, have to acquire special qualities and knowledge. Leaders have power that can make change and create action, but they need to relate to their followers. Leaders can make a difference and when they have departed, leave behind some kind of conviction and legacy. Other definitions refer to ‘the cause’, ‘the capacity’, ‘resources’, ‘influence’, and ‘personal qualities’ and so on (Lippman 1976; Hamby 1995). These phrases all have connotations of power relations and in order to better understand the notion of leadership the discourse needs to be broadened to examine what theorists have had to say about power.

Reser and Sarros (2000) and Bolden (2004) argue that the practical value of leadership has been obfuscated by complex theories. Hence, practitioners and academics have difficulty understanding each other. Nevertheless, Mann (2005) argues that, in a positive sense, the

\(^9\) Weber (1947) in his transactional and transformational model, also wrote about bureaucratic and traditional forms of leadership.
diversity associated with leadership also reflects a complex and rich field. Table 1A provides an overview of the historical development of leadership theory, and an indication of the diversity of types and styles.

**Table 1A: The Development of Leadership Theory**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Proponent</th>
<th>Theoretical Focus</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Situational</td>
<td>Fielder (1967), Hersey &amp; Blanchard (1977)</td>
<td>Leadership style depends on situation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Networked</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transactional</td>
<td>Bass (1990, 1997)</td>
<td>Rewards or punishments in exchange for performance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charismatic or</td>
<td>Weber (1947), Bass (1990), Greenleaf (1998)</td>
<td>Value-driven and performance-orientated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Servant</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relational</td>
<td>Borwick (1995), Draft (2001)</td>
<td>Shared leadership in teams and groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategic</td>
<td>Maghroori &amp; Rolland (1997)</td>
<td>Business and organisation-based strategies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taoist</td>
<td>Johnson (1997)</td>
<td>Positive inaction</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Contingency, Trait, or Spiritual Owen (1999), Kakabadse & Kakabadse (1999) Ability to lead is contingent on various situational factors including leaders preferred style

Distributed Howell & Shamir (2005) A relationship of mutual influence

Nodal Hutton (2004) Nodes of leadership points that are part of a network


The works of James MacGregor Burns (1978) on the concept of leadership are ‘seminal’ in terms of definition and analysis, according to Fairholm (2001: 1), and have led the way in legitimising the field in theory and practice. Burns (1978: 1–3) argued that there is a ‘crisis of leadership’ worldwide because there is a ‘mediocrity or irresponsibility’ of those in power. He also argued that one of the most serious failures in the study of leadership has been ‘the bifurcation between the literature on leadership and the literature on followership’ (Burns 1978: 3).

Burns (1978: 4) in shifting away from studying the traits of great men and transactional management began to focus on the interaction of leaders. He identified two basic types of leadership: ‘transactional’ and ‘transforming’. Most leaders and followers, he argued, operate in a transactional fashion where both parties wish to exchange something for another. Transforming leadership, whilst being more complex, is also more ‘potent’ (Burns 1978: 4). A leader in this situation looks for the motives of followers and exploits such motives. It can result in mutual satisfaction and elevation, and can convert followers into leaders. Occasionally leaders can become ‘moral agents’ (Burns 1978: 4). Burns (1978) argues that the original sources of leaders and followers lie in terms of human wants and the transformation
of wants into needs, social aspirations, collective expectations, and political demands. This raises the question as to whether leaders can be both transactional and transformational in their leadership styles.

Similarly, Heywood (2002) argues that leadership can be understood either as a pattern of behaviour or as a personal quality. He points out that as society becomes more ‘complex and fragmented’ people may increasingly look to personable leaders, as translators, to give ‘coherence and meaning’ to the world that they live in (Heywood 2002: 349). Heywood (2002: 349) argues that leadership can be identified within four key fields as follows:

- as a personal gift;
- a sociological phenomenon;
- as an organisational necessity; or
- as a political skill.

Reser and Saros (2000: 5) argue that the theories seem to ‘ebb and flow’ as ‘mainstream’ or ‘one-off’ theories come into vogue. However, generally leadership theorists tend to view leadership as having three established core forms. These are ‘trait’, ‘behaviours’ and ‘contingency’ theories (Schermerhorn 1996: 323–31). Schermerhorn (1996: 332–34) has also added a fourth grouping, ‘charismatic leadership’ (Weber 1947) which includes transactional and transformational leadership. New areas of theory, such as ‘enabling’, ‘critical’, and ‘ethical’ leadership continue to evolve (Falk and Smith 2003: 15). Trait and behavior leadership theory tends to focus on the individual leader. The other theories are based more on leadership as a process with social and organisational intervention (Falk and Smith 2003).
Falk and Smith (2003: 17) argue that leadership sense has to be ‘multi-faceted’ and is about a situation rather than solely about the characteristics of a person. It puts the focus on the leadership ‘processes’ as a key implicator related to change. Leadership is not just the domain of one person, but constructed as a ‘jointly owned or collective, approach to managing a specific set of events identified by a common purpose’ (Falk 2003: 194). Falk and Smith (2003: 18) argue that such enabling leadership requires that participants continually build:

- internal networks;
- links between internal and external networks;
- historicity (shared experiences including norms and attitudes);
- shared visions;
- shared communication; and
- each other’s self-confidence and identity shifts.

The enabling leadership paradigm is founded on identifying and preparing a group of people to carry the vision forward. Falk’s (2003: 201) argument that the ‘collective commitment’ requires regular re-negotiation is worthy and can possibly have application to the Indigenous situation where grouphood construction by senior leaders starts with the initiates at a young age and continues throughout life.

Levicki (1998: xvii) argues that whilst it cannot be proven that leaders are born with a special ‘leadership gene’, there is a gift, something special, that in the right circumstances comes to the fore. His interpretation is that ‘nature’ provides the gene, and the ‘nurture’ aspect is developed from a very early age such as being ‘chosen’ (Levicki 1998: 4–5). Early signs of
such potential, according to Levicki (1998: 5), include an independent spirit with good judgment, dignity, self-respect, respect for others, willingness and keenness to learn, and attractiveness.

McRae-McMahon (2001: 3) argues that any individual can be a leader but often their leadership role might be only fleeting depending on the occasion. At other times, we actually participate in the formation of the sort of leaderships we desire, those that we are prepared to ‘recognize and honour’ (McRae-McMahon 2001: 3–4). Globalisation has affected a false concept of leadership; true leadership, she argues will come from a variety of cultural styles that does not necessarily mean global uniformity of culture (McRae-McMahon 2001: 8).

Redding and Catalanello (cited in Falk 2003: 193) postulate that ‘a time for turbulence is also one of great opportunity for those who can understand, accept, and exploit the new realities: it is above all a time of opportunity for leadership’. This is particularly relevant to the change that Indigenous people have faced since first contact. Nevertheless, Falk (2003: 193) observes that effective leadership will depend on how well leaders ‘understand and operate across different areas’. In particular, he refers to the organisational roles and responsibilities, the leadership processes ‘in which they are engaged’, the shared values and visions of their organisations, local communities and regions.

Sociological theories of leadership propose that particular sociohistorical forces create leaders. The personalities of leaders are thus not as important as the broader social system of which they are part. A perspective of leadership that Heywood (2002: 352) espouses is the political
skill that can be learned and practised. It is often seen, he argues, in the dictatorship models such as Mao Zedong, Gaddafi and Saddam Hussein. In such cases, mass media is activated to stage-manage the leadership hype.

Mann (2005) derived five recurring approaches from leadership writing and research. The themes, some of which overlap, are:

- leadership as a set of roles, activities, and behaviours;
- leadership and crucial decisions;
- leaders and their personal characteristics and attributes;
- leadership as a set of vital social relationships; and
- leadership as a journey.

Mann (2005: 14-15) also points out that there is some opinion that leadership is ‘culture bound’ and that the challenge and task of leadership is influenced by era and generation. ‘Networked’ leadership (Jopling and Crandall 2006) coupled with ‘distributed’ leadership theory has gained momentum in recent years particularly in learning and educational settings. Leadership recognised in this form delineates a situation where potentially all members of a network can contribute to an informed perspective that is developed because of shared engagement with the external environment. I argue that aspects of this perspective have some relevance to the Indigenous leadership system at Port Keats.

A leadership concept that I wish to explore in this thesis is that related to ‘deference’. A ‘deferential society’ is defined in the ‘classical’ sense, of eighteenth-century England and
America, as ‘consisting of an elite and a non elite, in which the non elite regard the elite, without too much resentment, as being of superior status and culture to their own, and consider elite leadership in political matters to be something normal and natural’ (Pocock 1976: 516). In more recent times, in these countries and some others, the notion of ‘deference’ has modified to represent ‘respectful submission or yielding to the judgement, opinion, will, of another’ – or, it may mean ‘respectful or courteous regard: in deference to his wishes’ (Random House 2010).

Coupled with my interest in the concept of ‘deference’; and taking into account the hunter-gatherer background of the Port Keats people – I am interested in exploring how decisions were made and how leadership was constructed previously, and how they are now. In particular, I am interested in the relevance of deference in an egalitarian situation where survival was tenuous at times, external threats constant, and where decisions had to be made, often very quickly, about ‘what to do and how and when to do it’ (Van Vugt et al 2008: 183). Was the clan construct of usually about 30–60 people, in earlier times, the ideal unit for collective action in terms of decision-making and followership? Further, I ask whether, the clan and its decision-making process, has consistency with contemporary ways of decision-making, leadership and survival as a group. Perhaps deference, as a base of leadership, may assist in answering these questions.

**Leadership and Power**

Leadership is fundamentally associated with the concept of power. As with the definition of leadership, power is a multi-faceted concept with various theories and perspectives. It can
also be difficult to comprehend and articulate. Foucault (1982: 187) summed this up when he stated that ‘People know what they do; they frequently know why they do what they do; but what they don’t know is what what they do does’.

The dialogue about power tends to follow two main philosophical schools of thought proposed by Habermas and Foucault (Dryberg 1997; Flyvbjerg 2001; Hoy 1981). The dominant tradition proposed by Habermas and others such as Weber and Lukes, sees power as a tool and that it is the capacity to act or influence others. The Foucaultian tradition, encompassing the works of Foucault, Nietzsche, Rabinow and others, argues that power only exists when exercised in relationships: ‘it is the way in which some act on others’ (Foucault 2003: 137).

Weber (1947: 152), in his sociological work, referred to power as *Macht*, defined as ‘the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance, regardless of the basis on which this probability rests’. Weber (1947: 328) argued that there are three ‘pure’ types of legitimate authority based on rational, traditional and charismatic grounds. Legal (rational) authority extends to the persons exercising the authority only by virtue of the formal legality of their commands and within the scope of authority of the office. In the case of traditional authority, obedience is owed to the person of the chief who occupies the ‘traditionally sanctioned’ position of authority (Weber 1947: 328). Weber maintained that in some cases imperative control is exercised in the hands of ‘elders’ as a ‘gerontocracy’ (Weber 1947: 346). In some situations, Weber (1947: 346) argued there is ‘patriarchalism’ where groups, organised on both an economic and kinship
basis, follow the authority of a particular individual designated by a definite rule of inheritance.

Weber argues that both patriarchalism and gerontocracy are interconnected. The ‘decisive character of both … is in fact pre-eminently an authority on behalf of the group as a whole’ (Weber 1947: 346). Charismatic authority is obeyed by ‘virtue of personal trust in him and his revelation, his heroism or his exemplary qualities’ (Weber 1947: 328). Further, he argued that none of these types is usually found in a ‘pure’ form (Weber 1947: 329). It is usually a mix of some or all of the three types.

Habermas advocates that his work establishes a universal constitution of philosophy, social science and social organisation. Habermas (1983; 1987; 1990; 1993) argued for a theory of ‘communicative action’ and ‘discourse ethics’ where people by communicate and engagement in argumentative speech, reach a rationally motivated agreement. He argues that ‘Argumentation insures that all concerned in principle take part, freely and equally, in a cooperative search for truth, where nothing coerces anyone except the force of better argument’ (Habermas 1990: 120-121).

Habermas (1993: 31; 1990: 65-66; Kettner 1993) pointed out that validity and truth can only be reached by respecting five key requirements. These are that: (1) no party affected by what is discussed is excluded; (2) all participants should have the equal possibility to present and criticize; (3) participants must be willing and able to emphasise with each other’s validity
claims; (4) existing power differences between participants must be neutralised; and (5) participants must show transparency and openly explain their goals and intentions.

Power, from Foucault’s perspective, is ‘everywhere and exercised by everyone’ (Braynion 2004: 459). It is linked, according to Foucault (1969), to knowledge in an inescapable relationship. Power regimes produce forms of knowledge whilst knowledge produces the power regimes that foster the realities that they describe. Such discourse results in a certain ‘truth’ that creates who we are and how we see our worlds (Pinkus 1996). Foucault (1988: 27) argues that ‘there is in human relationships a whole range of power relations that come into play among individuals, with families, in pedagogical relationships, political life and so on’. It is about the individual, the particular and the circumstance.

Foucault (Braynion 2004: 458) argues that power is omnipresent and ‘can be used not only for repression but as a productive life source’. Foucault (cited in Rabinow 1984: 61) states that:

What makes power hold good, what makes it accepted, is simply the fact that it does not only weigh on us as a force that says no, but that it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms of knowledge, produces discourse. It needs to be considered as a productive network, which runs through the whole social body.
The ‘game of power’, according to Foucault (1988), influences behavior and shapes and determines such behavior. Leaders are not outside such processes and are ‘simultaneously produced and controlled by them’ (Braynion 2004: 460).

The two predominant ways of thinking about power are often seen as diametrically opposed. However, for the purposes of my research there are elements from both schools of thought that can be applied to my research. In the Port Keats situation, it appears worthwhile to analyse the situation in terms of the universals and ideals of the Habermas and his followers; and on the other hand, the emphasis of Foucault on the micro-politics and contextualism may provide further insights into the society and its leadership. On the surface social and political life at Port Keats appears fairly strict and regimented with certain leaders exercising power in a consistently rigid, autocratic fashion within clan-based structures. However, on closer examination there is power ebbing and flowing. It is played out in ways such as anomalies along traditional decision-making gender lines, power struggles between age-groups, occasions of conflict, debate and resolution, ‘deals’ done with outsiders such as governments so that occasionally governments assume they have had a ‘win’ and so on. Dialogue and debate ensues within both formal and informal settings.

**Functions of Leaders and Leadership**

Social psychologists, McGregor (1960) and Blake and Mouton (1964) highlighted the importance of what leaders actually ‘do’. Organisational and management analysts, Reser and Sarros (2000: 8–9) examined the literature (from 1990–1999) and developed an analysis of various leadership functions including role model, moral developer, executive decision-
maker, ethics upholder, style master, chief learner, emancipator of people, mission maker, collaborator, expert, rule enforcer, and warrior. From these functions, they extrapolated 23 ‘job functions’ (Reser and Sarros 2000: 8–9). According to Reser and Sarros (2000: 8–9) leaders may:

- motivate people;
- find a direction for their organization;
- be a catalyst of human resources;
- act as a designer;
- be a teacher;
- develop the core values of their organization;
- be an official challenger of the organization’s status quo;
- function as a communicator;
- develop a vision for their organization;
- co-ordinate organizational change;
- serve as a strategist;
- be a role model for followers;
- develop the morals of their colleagues;
- be an executive decision maker;
- uphold ethical standards in the workplace;
- operate in a variety of styles to suit prevailing circumstances;
- be the chief learner in organisations that value learning;
- free, or emancipate, their people from outmoded ideas or practices;
- develop a new mission for their organization;
• collaborate with others in the leadership process;
• be an expert in some field;
• be an enforcer of rules and regulations; and
• be a warrior in both military and non-military contexts.

Despite the extensive literature on leadership, there are still inadequacies in terms of what can be observed in Indigenous Australia. These functions of leadership are overly structuralist and orientated heavily toward the role of leaders in organisations and companies. Whilst Reser and Sarros (2000: 9) stress that more research is required, the key thrust of their research indicates that leaders serve in three main concomitant capacities; as coordinators of human resources, comptrollers of organisational destiny, and moral coaches.

Reser and Saros (2000) argue that leaders are concerned with motivating, changing and guiding people. They are responsible for the destiny of the organisation or entity, and in association with others, assist in developing the core morals. Weaknesses of this approach are that leaders have a high expectation placed upon them to perform. They are the ones who have to inspire, direct change and guide others in a relentless pursuit of excellence. The followers only have to follow. This approach, I believe, is flawed because even in Western society we can see examples where morals, goals, and leaders are shaped by the followers. An example of this may be in Australia where populist politics often comes to the fore. The leaders are elevated and entrusted with responsibility by followers, and then monitored on performance. I argue that leadership is shaped, not only by societal norms, but also by environmental factors.
such as political, economic and ecological influences, and will provide evidence to develop this argument in following chapters.

**What Leaders Say about Themselves and Their Leadership**

In order to ascertain what leaders throughout the world hold as important values, and how they visualise themselves, I will briefly examine some of the attributes and motivations of prominent world leaders. These leaders include Nelson Mandela, the Dalai Lama, Mahatma Gandhi, Winston Churchill, Martin Luther King and John F. Kennedy.

**Nelson Mandela**

Nelson Mandela began to develop his leadership style at an early stage as he was going through the rites of initiation associated with his family. He explains:

> As a leader … I have always endeavored to listen to what each and every person in a discussion had to say before venturing my own opinion. Oftentimes, my own opinion will simply represent a consensus of what I heard in the discussion. I always remember the regent’s axiom: a leader, he said, is like a shepherd.

(Mandela 1994: 25)
The Dalai Lama XIV

The Dalai Lama believes that a strong foundation of principles guide his leadership style. He contends that every individual has to ‘cultivate a universal responsibility’ for one another and ‘for the planet we share’ (Bstan-'dzin-rgya-mtsho, Dalai Lama XIV, 1990: 270). Further, he stresses that ‘motivation’ is the key driving emotion of humanity. He maintains that everything which an individual experiences is ‘derived through action from motivation’. Motivation, the Dalai Lama (Bstan-'dzin-rgya-mtsho, Dalai Lama XIV, 1990: 10) argues, is thus ‘the root of both action and experience’.

Mahatma Gandhi

Mahatma Gandhi believed that man could remake his psychology. ‘What you think, you become’ he once said (see Gandhi cited in Fischer 1954: 146). Similarly, to the Dalai Lama, he had a loyalty to certain key leadership principles. Fischer (1954: 143) explains that these were ‘The exaltation of means over ends: non-violence; the primacy of the truth; the caring qualities of trust; and consideration for the other person’s doubts, time-lag, environment and inner conflicts’.

Gandhi, according to Fischer (1954: 154), believed that ‘Unselfishness preserves life, whereas love of the ego kills it’. Fischer (1954: 143) argued that Gandhi had personal ethics based on ‘truth, love, service, scrupulous methods and means, non hurting by deed or word, tender tolerance of differences and desirelessness or at least, moderation in the pursuit of material things’.
**Winston Churchill**

Sir Winston Churchill, on the other hand, was ‘ebullient and self-centred’ and he had ‘little time or space for other people and their opinions’ (Charmley 1993: 86). Charmley (1993: 61) argues that he had ‘a very aristocratic disdain for the opinion of others, as well as an egotism which was purely his own’. However Churchill was a ‘man of action’ and was someone ‘who liked to have a grandiose governing plan’ behind whatever he was doing (Charmley 1993: 53). Churchill’s leadership was effective within a tightly defined context. This type of leadership was no longer needed after the war had ended and might be defined as a ‘specific purpose leadership’.

**Martin Luther King**

Martin Luther King argued that power used properly could bring about social, political or economic changes. Power, King argued (1967: 37) is not only ‘desirable but necessary to implement the demands of love and justice’. However, King stated that even if the ‘vast majority of Negroes’ did not reject violence, he would not be interested in being ‘a consensus leader’ (King 1967: 63). He said that he refused to ‘determine what is right by taking a Gallup poll’ (King 1967: 63). King believed that a genuine leader ‘is not a searcher for consensus but a molder of consensus’. A ‘true alliance’ he maintains, ‘is based upon some self-interest of each component group and a common interest into which they merge’ (King 1967: 151).

**John F. Kennedy**

According to Schlesinger (1965: 104), John F. Kennedy was a ‘man of action’ but he was also a good thinker. His mind was objective, practical, ironic, skeptical, unfettered and insatiable.
Schlesinger (1965: 110) points out that Kennedy rarely lost sight of other people’s motives and problems and whilst he was ‘cool on the surface’, he had an ‘instinctive tendency’ to ‘put himself into the skins of others’.

These charismatic leaders embody certain key styles of leadership and qualities. Mandela sees himself, and carries out this vision, as a ‘shepherding’ type of leader that uses consensus. The Dalai Lama believes in a strong foundation, good-heartedness, and the need for people to be motivated themselves. Gandhi believed in truthfulness, trust, care and consideration for others, and unselfishness. Churchill was egotistical, needed a ‘big’ plan, and was able to play on people’s emotions and rally them. King embodied fairness, and a strong link between leadership, power and the means to an end. He believed in molding consensus and working on what was already there. He was seen as virtuous, enthusiastic, and a person with moral and ethical principles that could inspire confidence and trust. Kennedy wanted to be seen as a man of action, but gave deep thought to his actions. He believed in a certain moral code, and knowledge of the environment that he was working in. He was able to appeal to the emotions and hopes of his people and win their confidence and trust.

 Whilst all of these leaders were obviously different, some qualities appear common in all. They have a knowledge and plan of how to ‘shepherd’ people in a certain direction, a commitment (or at least the appearance of) to caring for others, and the ability to emphasise with and exude traits that cater for the basic physiological needs of others. These needs can be categorised as the need for trust, the truth, consideration, virtuosity, confidence, and hope. I witnessed, during my research, elements of these leadership styles in the leaders at Port Keats.
Hunter-Gatherer Systems of Leadership

The field of Aboriginal leadership study in Australia is founded on people who were traditionally hunter-gatherers. Almost all hunter-gatherer societies have been under pressure from colonisation, and the expansion of agriculture and pastoral regimes in most parts of the world. Hence when one examines the societal structure of authority and leadership in this context, it is a given that it has evolved and adapted over time. Hunter-gatherer settlements are permanent, temporary or a combination of the two. Generally, hunter-gatherer societies have non-hierarchical, egalitarian social structures. This is primarily the case in more mobile groups where it is difficult to store food. Burch and Ellanna (1994: 3) argue also that there is considerable variance in the historical and ethnographic record of the governance and leadership arrangements of hunter-gatherer societies. For instance the Calusa of southern Florida had ‘substantial wealth and a fully developed class system’ as opposed to other peoples who had ‘almost nothing’ (Burch and Ellanna 1994: 3). Examples of hunter-gatherer leadership models are listed in Table 1B.

Table 1B: Examples of Hunter-gatherer Leadership Systems Throughout the World

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of Group</th>
<th>Leadership Type</th>
<th>Founded on</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Haida (Northwest Coast, North America)</td>
<td>Chief</td>
<td>Hereditary status and wealth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hai//om (Namibia)</td>
<td>Community leader</td>
<td>Qualities and skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ache (Paraguay)</td>
<td>No formal leaders</td>
<td>Decisions by consensus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inuvialut (Canadian Artic)</td>
<td>Family head</td>
<td>Skill, generosity and family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connections</td>
<td>Authority Through Supernatural Foundations</td>
<td>Inegalitarianism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Calusa (Gulf Coast, North America)</td>
<td>Chiefs</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Waswanipi Cree (Quebec, North America)</td>
<td>Individual Decision-Making</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cuiva (Columbia and Venezuela)</td>
<td>Authority in Autonomous Domains</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Batek De’ (Malaysia)</td>
<td>Informal Leadership</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Birhors (India)</td>
<td>Headman</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ainu (Japan and Siberia)</td>
<td>Headmen</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mbuti (Congo)</td>
<td>No Ruling Group</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aka (Central African Republic and Congo)</td>
<td>Influential Men</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Huaorani (Ecuador)</td>
<td>Egalitarian</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mikea (Madagascar)</td>
<td>Egalitarian</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nayaka (India)</td>
<td>Egalitarian and Kin-Based</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Okiek (Kenya and Tanzania)</td>
<td>Units of Sociopolitical Decision-Making</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Adapted from Lee and Daly 2006.

Many of these hunter-gatherer groups have changed their lifestyle patterns from nomadic to sedentary due to various factors. Subsequently their absence of leadership, has often changed
in order to engage with the wider society. Research (Lee and Daly 2006) indicates that hunter-gatherer societies predominantly institute their leadership on principles based on:

- kin and genealogical linkages;
- social hierarchy;
- ritual legitimization;
- egalitarianism;
- personal skill and knowledge;
- mediation roles;
- consensual processes and a notion of ‘shepherding’;
- generosity, reciprocity and emotive empathy for others; and
- resource management expertise.

‘Big Men’

The term ‘big man’ is occasionally heard within the Indigenous Australian context. The concept of ‘Big men’ began to emerge following Malinowski’s (1922: 41-66) functional approach which identified ‘chiefs’ and tribal ‘elders’ in the Trobriand Islands. The most prominent chief came from the highest ranked sub-clan and he wielded power not only in his own village but his ‘sphere of influence’ extended far beyond (Malinowski 1922: 63). The chief had to pay for services and tributes from his own wealth. Leadership in this instance was an ‘outward sign’ and the chief had to accumulate and sustain the wealth through his wives
and an intricate system of Kula\textsuperscript{10} social networks and privileges (Malinowski 1922: 64). Generosity was a key societal value and Malinowski (1922: 97) argued that to be powerful is to be wealthy and to be wealthy is to be generous. It was a ‘big, complicated institution’ expressed in ‘small, internal transactions’ ranging to ‘big over-seas expeditions’ (Malinowski 1922: 103–104). Malinowski established that the intricate and complex Kula exchange networks were about material exchange that underpinned social relationships, well-being and leadership.

The evolutionary model of the Melanesian ‘big-man’, developed by Sahlins (1963), contrasted with the ranked chiefs and chiefdoms in Polynesia and eastern Melanesia. In Papua New Guinea, the phrase \textit{bikpela man} (or ‘big-man’) generally refers to adults, headmen of a village, important men, or men of influence and authority (Mihalic 1971). Whilst big-men are associated with power which is accumulated entrepreneurially through exchanges, another category is that of ‘great men’ (Godelier 1982) which is identified in societies characterised by restricted exchanges and ritual complexity.

Godelier (1982: 96) in his research on the Baruya also identifies male hierarchical figures or rankings such as ‘great warrior’, ‘great shaman’ and ‘great hunter’ within the great-man broader categorisation. Godelier (1982: 139) argues that these positions can be acquired through initiative and talent. Dominant positions are also inherited and these positions are known as \textit{Kwaimatnie} men (Godelier 1982: 137).

\textsuperscript{10} The Kula exchange system is a network where participants exchange Kula valuables which consist of shell-disc necklaces (\textit{veigun} or \textit{soulava}) that are traded to the north (circling the ring in clockwise direction) and shell armbands (\textit{mwali}) that are traded in the southern direction (circling anti-clockwise) (Malinowski 1922).
Godelier (1982: 276) hypothesises that the development of exchanges and production might have been part of a process that fostered the transformation of great-man societies into big-man societies. Friedman (1981, 1982) maintains that transformation is derived from a chiefly form, where big-men as informal leaders appear in conjunction with resources and low population density. Brown (1990: 102) argues that rather than there being single criterion for big-man status, there are numerous, including community size and scale, use of force, ritual power, despotic acts, collective or individual power, and stratification. The background associated with the term ‘big man’ has been detailed in the instance of Melanesia and Papua New Guinea in order to clarify its original usage by anthropologists – the Australian media and other commentators appear to have latched on to the term ‘big man’ to describe Australian Indigenous leaders who supposedly have built an autocratic leadership base usually from corrupt resources. I argue that, in the Port Keats regional situation, whilst there are the occasional ‘big men’ who have influence because of the ability to access and disburse desired resources and who may have leadership bases through other means, their influence is monitored and constrained by the existing societal structure.

**Arguments about Australian Indigenous Leadership**

Debate has ensued since colonisation about whether Indigenous Australians had leadership or some form of governance (Ivory 2008). Opinions, located within an evolutionist framework, evolved through various stages including ‘primitive man’ and ‘savages’. It progressed to the recognition of ‘old men’ and ‘past-masters’, to more formalised systems of leadership, authority and governance. Burch and Ellanna (1994: 1) maintain that many of these early assumptions and opinions were associated with ‘political philosophy, not science, and the
arguments and assumptions were based more on fantasy than fact’. It is important to examine this progression of the debate because it provides an insight into how leadership is construed today in Australian Indigenous society.

**Social Evolutionism**

Hobbes (1930: 249–251) in 1651 argued that men were born equal but were continually, from time of birth, in competition with others. The three main causes of quarrel, according to Hobbes (1930: 252), were competition, diffidence and glory. Without some form of controlling power or governance, men were constantly at war ‘against every man’ (Hobbes 1930: 252). For ‘savage people’, life is lived without government, and it is conducted in a ‘brutish manner’ (Hobbes 1930: 255). Hobbes (1930: 261) argued that whilst life might be bettered by mutual aid, at this stage of societal development, men are more interested in obtaining ‘dominion’ rather than assisting others. Thus in the ‘original’ of societies, there was no mutual good, but ‘mutual fear’ (Hobbes 1930: 261).

However, Rousseau (1984: 81–83) thought that ‘the natural state of man’ facilitated a situation where man in his original state is at peace with the world. As man progresses to a civil state, his life becomes more complicated, more laborious and there is more inequality (Rousseau 1984: 136). Such inequality, ‘almost non-existent’ in the state of nature, becomes ‘more fixed and legitimate through the institution of property and laws’ (Rousseau 1984: 137). Darwin also argued that although there was competition between individuals of the same species, there was also cooperation. The positions of Hobbes and Rousseau was fundamental to how many
early writers in Australia viewed the Indigenous people and influenced the attitude that formed the basis for some of the initial contacts.

‘Primitive Savages’

In 1888, Thomas H. Huxley (1825–1895), surgeon and medical scientist, divulged his views on the anthropoid origin of man and the notion of the ‘primitive savage’. Huxley (1967: 182), an energetic supporter of the evolutionary theory proposed by Darwin, argued that in the case of ‘the primitive savage’, he ‘fights out the struggle for existence to the bitter end like any other animal’. Huxley (1967: 140) maintained that one of the best examples of primitive man, in his ‘simplest condition’ could be ‘met among the Australian savages’. However, he argued, society evolves and leads to a conception of justice which is one of the ‘oldest and most important elements in such systems’. Such conception, coupled with the concept of mutual trust, ‘is the bond of society’ (Huxley 1967: 172).

Mutual Dependence

In 1888, during the same period as Huxley was publishing, Peter Kropotkin (2008 [1902]) argued in his publication *Mutual Aid: A Factor in Evolution* that mutual aid amongst species appears to be the rule amongst the most successful species. Kropotkin with his anarchist outlook argued that they (the anarchists) conceive a society in which all the mutual relations of its members are regulated, not by laws, not by authorities, whether self-imposed or elected, but by mutual agreements. There would not be a government of man by other men, but a continual evolution such as is seen in nature. Countering Huxley’s Rousseauian view of a free fight for
existence, Kropotkin argued that customs and taboos in tribes and clans ensured cooperation and mutual aid. He referred to Australia as an example where communities lacking government nevertheless acted in a spirit of social solidarity.

**Anthropological Perspectives on Australian Indigenous Leadership**

In concurrence with early opinions on Australian Indigenous leadership, Flanagan, a journalist and historian writing in 1853–54, argued that Aboriginal people had ‘authority or unity of no description’ and that they had ‘no chiefs’ (Flanagan 1888: 15). The literature records a continuing debate on whether there was systematic or schematic forms of Indigenous leadership in Australia, and if there was, what it looked like. The British were particularly concerned that there did not appear to be ‘any civil regulations, or ordinances, which may exist among this people’ (Tench 1961 [1793]: 51). Table 1C details key positions in this discourse about Indigenous leadership.

**Table 1C: Paradigms of Australian Indigenous leadership**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Proponent and Period</th>
<th>Brief Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chief or chiefs</td>
<td>Tench (1961) [1793], Batman (1835) in Billot (1979), Grey (1841), Taplin (1874), Dawson (1881), Thomas, W. (1898) in Bride (1969)</td>
<td>Chiefs but no ‘civil regulations’; Chief selected by family heads; Authority over a certain territory; Government is patriarchal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Head of group</td>
<td>Collins (1804), Thomas, N. (1906), Wheeler (1910), Elkin (1938), Biskup (1973), Von</td>
<td>Family heads; Assembly of elders; ‘Past masters’; Local group headmen; Ceremonial</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**NB:** When the date of observation/description differs from that of publication it is noted in square brackets.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Authors References</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No Chiefs</td>
<td>Wilkes (1845), Eyre (1845), Flanagan (1888) [1853], Radcliffe-Brown (1913)</td>
<td>‘Laws’; No authority/ no chiefs; No tribal chief, nor any form of tribal government</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Old men</td>
<td>Smyth (1878), Spencer &amp; Gillen (1938) [1899], Strehlow (1947), Stanner (1979) [1953], Thomson (1972), Sackett (1978), Rowse (1998 [1989])</td>
<td>Men who ‘took the lead’; Headmen of council; Leaders; ceremonial chiefs; Mature men</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eminent, prominent, influential, and great men</td>
<td>Howitt (1967) [1880], Curr (1886), Elkin (1938), Maddock (1972), Kolig (1981), Keen (1994)</td>
<td>‘Men of note’; Prominent men; Bosses or ‘bunggawa’/ ‘looking after’ others; networks; local and personal authority</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No headmen</td>
<td>Sharp (1958), Meggitt (1962)</td>
<td>No leaders, headmen, or chiefs; Kinship-related social rules</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senior men</td>
<td>Hiatt (1965)</td>
<td>Clan-based senior men</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Early constructs of Indigenous leadership were based on perceptions of European military-type paradigms and past encounters with ‘natives’. There was a yearning for chiefs, chieftain-type engagement and hierarchy. Tench (1793: 51) observed what appeared to be a ‘chief’ at the head of a line of fourteen men, but saw no ‘degrees of subordination’. Collins (1804: 544) described Aboriginal families in Sydney where ‘the head or fenior [sic] of which exacts compliance from the reft [sic]’. Batman in 1835 negotiated with a ‘principal chief’ who gave him his ‘best spear to carry’ (Batman 1973: 31). Grey (1841) described being attacked by a group led by a ‘chief’ and laws with authority that was founded in oral tradition (Grey 1983: 106). According to Wilkes (1845), Aboriginal society had no word for ‘chief’ but a social system where the young ‘are required to yield implicit obedience to their elders’ reported that

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mundane life a predominate tendency</td>
<td></td>
<td>toward egalitarianism. Ceremonial men with reputations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managers</td>
<td>Burridge (1973)</td>
<td>Middle-aged men who ‘managed’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Authority and Higher order</td>
<td>Myers (1976)</td>
<td>Authority through progressive growth/ ‘looking after’ others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Masterful men</td>
<td>Sansom (1980)</td>
<td>Men with business acumen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dominant and adventurous men</td>
<td>Gerritsen (1981)</td>
<td>Control of public sector/ Appropriation &amp; sharing of benefits amongst followers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Experts’</td>
<td>Trigger (1992)</td>
<td>Context-based on two domains; Joint status; middle-men</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
in their travels they had not encountered any chiefs. Eyre (1845: 315) could not distinguish any chiefs but observed ‘men who took the lead’.

From first contact onwards, records document the British and others negotiating and interacting with key Aboriginal individuals to ‘get things done’. Some individuals who were seen as cooperative and influential were given ‘King’, ‘Queen’, or ‘Chief’ plates to make them more visible to all concerned.

Influenced by classical cultural evolutionism, observers of Indigenous society in Australia during the later period of the nineteenth century began to shift their gaze toward other analyses of social control. Smyth (1878) noted that in Victoria there were councils of ‘old men of the tribe’. Howitt (1880) distinguished ‘eminent men’ (1991: 212–213) and ‘men of note’ (1991: 211) who took the lead in certain affairs. Curr (1886), Thomas (1898), Spencer and Gillen (1899), Northcote Thomas (1906) and Wheeler (1910) all perceived the existence of influential men who were headmen of their group and sometimes members of councils or assemblies of elders.

Radcliffe-Brown (1913), firmly entrenched within an anarchist synthesis of the Aboriginal polity stated ‘There is no tribal chief, nor any form of tribal government’. From a structuralist-functionalist perspective, he argued that kinship was the binding force of social order. Nevertheless, Elkin (1938: 31) wrote of elders, masters, past-masters and headmen who through physical and personal attribute exercised authority. Strehlow (1947: 5) when he was conducting research in Central Australia described a comprehensive system of authority that
was overseen by councils of elderly ‘leaders’ where youths were indoctrinated into the system of law in a very controlled environment of moral and ethical codes (Strehlow 1947: 121).

Despite the position of Meggitt (1962: 242) who argued that there were ‘no tribal leaders, headmen, or chiefs; nor was there any controlling or ruling class of old or important men whose power extended through the society’, other researchers continued to develop knowledge of a complex system of Indigenous leadership. A key responsibility, amongst Aboriginal groups in western Arnhem Land, referred by them as Gawonan, was to ‘look after’ other members of the group (Berndt and Berndt 1969: 150). Others such as Myers (1976) and Keen (1994), further elaborated on this concept of ‘looking after’ others. However, Berndt and Berndt (1969: 150) also argued that ‘outside contact’ and subsequent ‘outside control’ has altered this system of order.

Whilst much of the debate had earlier centered on the existence or non-existence of chieftain-type structures, Burridge (1973) suggested that leadership status could be enhanced by the possession of personal qualities balanced with political acumen and economic skills. Sutton (1982: 184) argued that adult males could gain prominence by developing ‘careers’ that some will build on to acquire further authority and influence. Further he maintained that physical attributes, skills, political links to other ‘strong people’, social linkages, coupled with a desire to flout the ‘rules’ can further one’s career (Sutton 1982: 184). The concept of control, by the ownership and management of ritual knowledge and ceremony, was developed by Gerritsen (1981) and Bern (1979).
Sutton and Rigsby (1982) unwrapped a notion of Indigenous ‘politicks’ that involved the sensitive management by individuals of other people within a land-based structure. Men could be placed in ‘definitional positions’ by such acquisition of status and authority within a political structure. Tonkinson (1991) warned though that such roles are context-specific and no individual has a mandate over leadership roles. Keen (1994: 98) argues that the roles of male leaders have changed during the 50 years since the establishment of missions in the Northern Territory and that their authority may have previously been ‘greater’.

Later research conducted by researchers in case-study situations has yielded much more detailed knowledge of the intricacies and complexity of the workings of Indigenous leadership and the variations that can apply in different parts of the continent. The literature might be summarised as proposing that Indigenous leadership in Australia has five frequent characteristics as follows:

1. Leadership is founded in hierarchical structures that are often group-based. Kinship, marriage and social bonds define and bind such groups.
2. Men commence their leadership ‘training’ from an early age and such indoctrination continues through life.
3. Age and knowledge play an important part in defining one’s position on the leadership scale.
4. Some men can become more influential than others by their own personal attributes or by the accumulation of power through ceremonial means, women and followers and access to other resources.
5. Influential men can broaden their leadership base and prowess by further developing social ties through reciprocal obligations. Such ties can develop into complex networks of authority and power and may be influenced by contemporary arrangements and resources. The literature occasionally refers to such individuals as ‘big-men’ or by other terms.

Anthropologists and others observing specific groups in particular areas of Australia have developed such evidence so far. More recently, Keen (2004; 2006) suggests that there may be regional variations in leadership structures and inequality based on influences such as environmental conditions and polygyny. Peterson (1986: 59) and Tonkinson (1991) argue that there is ‘substantial variance’ in the size of estates, not just between regions, but within them as well. Peterson (1986: 59) argues that with such variation, there is correlation with ‘regional environmental differences’. I argue that such variance in estate size may influence how Indigenous leadership develops in different areas. For example, those groups living on smaller estates were, and in some cases still are, closer together with often more reasons for conflict perhaps resulting in conflict-driven and decisive leadership. This and other more subtle stimuli may in fact go some way to explaining why there has been such wide variance and divergence in opinion. It is this proposition that provides a catalyst for my research and has influenced the selection of Port Keats in the Northern Territory of Australia as the research site (see Map 1A on page 2).
The Case Study: Port Keats

Port Keats is a place known at various times as the ‘Wild Lands’ (Idriess 1941: 4), the ‘bad lands’ (Downer 1963: 138), a region ‘far beyond the limits of settlement’ (Stanner 1973: 2), and as the epitome of ‘the Last Frontier’ (Powell 1996: 5). The late Professor William Stanner (1973: 2–3) said that during the 1930s, when he first thought of visiting the area it was regarded as ‘inaccessible, far beyond the economic margin, wild, and supposedly inhabited by very ferocious blacks’. If Port Keats epitomises Australia’s so called ‘wilderness’, untouched as it were, then possibly it might also illuminate our knowledge of how Indigenous leadership in Australia was, and is, constructed. Further, it may also provide further explanation on the conceptualisation of leadership in general.

The harsh reality of the Australian landscape begs the question of how much the environment influences and moulds leadership patterns and styles. Anthropologists debate the topic of leadership amongst Indigenous Australians but the variance of views raises questions about whether what they have ‘seen’ varies on a regional basis. Perhaps a key lies in what Peterson (1986) and Tonkinson (1991) propose as the difference in land ownership and estates between arid regions and the more temperate areas. Peterson (1986: 59) argues that there is ‘substantial variance’ in the size of estates, not just between regions, but within them as well. He argues that with such variation, there is correlation with ‘regional environmental differences’ (Peterson 1986: 59). Peterson called for a more detailed regional analysis on territorial

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12 Port Keats is a term often used to describe the broader region. Wadeye is the largest township in the region. Aboriginal people in 2002 decided to resurrect the use of a term, Thamarrurr, to describe Indigenous governance practice, and subsequently a local council, and the region, is referred to by this term.
organisation. Tonkinson (1988b: 554) explores predominantly egalitarian tendencies among Western Desert society characterised by cultural homogeneity ‘matched’ by ecological homogeneity, cooperation and the permeability of boundaries. Perhaps it might be further argued that a regional influence might be extended to leadership patterns; a distinct lack of ‘big-men’ in more central parts of Australia as compared to the more temperate and more densely inhabited regions.

*Port Keats: The Place*

The Northern Territory has a number of major river and flood land systems. One of these is the Moyle River system of the Port Keats region (and the site of this research), considered by some as the most important in terms of diversity and sustainability on the northwestern coast of the Northern Territory. Dixon (2002: 36) argues that, across the world, language families are associated with a certain type of terrain. There appears to be more diversity in mountainous and forested areas. Further he writes that smaller linguistic areas appear to be associated in Australia with areas ‘that are relatively well resourced’ (Dixon 2002: 40). This hypothesis is relevant to the Port Keats region with its relatively small estates, reasonably high population densities, and abundance of resources. Keen (2004; 2006) addressed regional variance in such matters.

In the north of the Territory, such river systems had a major influence on where Aboriginal people hunted and gathered, lived, conducted ceremonies, created art, and generally conducted most of their affairs. Archaeological research supports the view that often Aboriginal people
would move to other sites to visit people or to hunt and gather certain food or items, but usually their migratory circuit would take them back to the rich sites along the riverland. Delicacies such as magpie goose, crocodile eggs, barramundi, zamia palm nuts, and other resources were in abundance. Certainly, such systems were able to support many more people than in other less resourced areas.

The township of Wadeye is situated 320 kilometres south-west of Darwin, in the Northern Territory. Today the region is still relatively isolated\(^{13}\) and cut-off by poor road conditions affected by heavy rain for about five months of the year during the ‘Wet Season’.\(^{14}\) The main road is gravel for about 100 kilometres of its 360 kilometre journey and crosses two major rivers (the Daly River and the Moyle River) and numerous creeks. During the wet season, movement is restricted to travel by air or sea, an expensive option for locals. One can walk from one language group’s area to another in a day or so in the Thamarrurr region depending on flooding.

The country in the Port Keats region is diverse and spectacular. It ranges from inland floodplains to magnificent beaches, mangrove and monsoonal forests, and mountain ranges that still prove impenetrable in parts even today. The Sugarloaf Ranges are located 10 kilometres east of Wadeye, and the Wingate Mountains approximately 120 kilometres to the east. The Macadam Ranges abut the Fitzmaurice River 50 kilometres to the southeast. Within the Macadam Ranges lie the notorious Madjellindi and Koolndong Valleys that few non-

\(^{13}\) Classified as ‘very remote’ within the Australian Bureau of Statistic (ABS) (2006) classification model.

\(^{14}\) The ‘wet season’ of heavy tropical monsoonal rainfall usually extends from about December to April each year.
Aboriginal people have visited, even today. Further south, over the Fitzmaurice River, is the Bradshaw Field Training Area utilised by the Australian and American defense forces and once known as Bradshaw Station. Aboriginal people often talk about a ‘blackfella highway’ (a foot-track) that their ancestors regularly walked from Port Keats to Bradshaw Station and Timber Creek (Bunduck 2004: pers. com). It linked to other foot-tracks that went north through Daly River towards Darwin.

The geology of the study area comprises predominantly Permian geological formations made up of sandstone, siltstone, clay stone and shale (Woodside 2004: 7–9). Regional physiological features are the Cambridge Gulf Lowlands and the coastal flood plains. Much of the region is seasonally inundated, the largest area being around the Moyle River (Woodside 2004: 11). The coastline is highlighted by spectacular beaches and in some places enormous red rock cliffs. The country supports a multitude of animals, birdlife, and other resources and this is appears to be an essential reason why so many peoples inhabit the region.

Fauna of the coastal areas within the region include invertebrates, crustaceans (particularly mud crab and prawns), molluscs (including oysters and squid), fish of over 43 species (particularly barramundi, threadfin salmon, and shark), dugongs, dolphins, turtles, crocodiles and whales. The region has nationally and globally significant numbers of bird species in breeding colonies along the coastline and in major floodplains (Chatto 2000).

15 For that matter, not many Aboriginal people alive today have been there either.
16 Up until about the 1960s, Aboriginal people, including women and children, would walk from the Timber Creek area to Port Keats and sometimes through Daly River to Darwin, and return. Most people today though, except for some older generations, have not walked this part of the country.
Whilst the primary region of research will be referred to as the ‘Port Keats’ or the ‘Thamarrurr’ region, consideration also has to be given to places outside of the region because of their impacts on the research. To the north are the Daly River and the community of Nauiyu Nambiyu. Eighty kilometres northeast lies the community of Peppiminarti. Palumpa is about 50 kilometres east of Wadeye and many of the people here are kin relations of those in the Port Keats region. South of Port Keats, across the Macadam Ranges is the community of Timber Creek, numerous cattle stations and linkages further south toward Dagaragu and Lajamanu.  

Some Port Keats groups maintain relationships even further south toward the town of Elliot. Regular contact exists also toward the Western Australian towns of Kununurra and Wyndham. People from the Port Keats area also have varying degrees of relationships to the north including Darwin, the Tiwi Islands, Belyuen and also into Arnhem Land. Toward the east, there are networks of relationships and religious linkages to Pine Creek, Katherine and beyond.

The Daly River Reserve was originally declared as an Aboriginal Reserve in 1885 (Crassweller 2004: 8). The principal land use in the region today is traditional hunting,

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17 Historically there have been strong affiliations and travel by Port Keats people to Bradshaw, Legune and Auvergne Stations.

18 The Commonwealth Government managed it until 1976 when the land tenure of the region was declared as inalienable Aboriginal freehold under the Aboriginal Land Rights Act 1976 (Commonwealth). It was subsequently vested in the Daly River/Port Keats Aboriginal Land Trust and managed by the Northern Land Council.
fishing and other food gathering activities. There are also a number of rural communities (sometimes called ‘outstations’ or ‘homelands’).

Recent exploration off the coast in the Joseph Bonaparte Gulf, has realised reserves of gas about 80 kilometres offshore. These reserves are being resourced and the gas will be brought onshore and piped overland in order to supply the city of Darwin. There are a number of mineral exploration leases including for the exploration of diamond and base metals. Nearby stations support herds of cattle and the area has an untapped virgin wilderness favorable to tourism, fishing, camping and possibly other economic ventures such as carbon trading. The Moyle Floodplain and Hyland Bay System have been nominated for National Significance under the *Environmental Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (Cth) (EPBCA).

The regional climate of the research area is tropical monsoonal, consisting of two predominant seasons. The winter or ‘dry season’ months (April to September) are influenced by easterly winds generated over inland Australia, resulting in dry and warm conditions, with very little rainfall and low relative humidity. A hot and often wet summer, known as the ‘wet season’, persists from October to March. Murrinh-patha speaking people refer to three major seasons as *da thangku* the wet season, *da mirrangan* the dry cold season, and *da kurlgurl* the humid beginning to the wet season.

Stanner, during the late 1950s conducted archaeological research in the region. Carbon dating at one site, Yara (sometimes spelt Yardarr or Yarra), revealed that occupation in the area
occurred at least 6,000 years ago. The sites were re-analysed by Flood (1967) and Gregory (1998b). Types of artefacts identified were cores, retouched flakes and points. The Yara site is located on land belonging to the Yek Ngudanimarn clan, Murrinh-patha language. Bernard Jabinee a senior custodian, remembered camping in the shelter as a child (about 1940) prior to Stanner’s research. Bernard’s father, during this period, was still making stone and glass spear tips, stone axes, and his wives were using hollows in the rock to grind seeds.

**Port Keats: The People**

The region today has about 2,300 Indigenous residents and this figure is expected to double within a generation (Taylor and Stanley 2005: 18). By 2023, Wadeye will probably be the fourth largest town in the NT (Taylor and Stanley 2005: 18). Taylor and Stanley (2005: 11) describe this population as ‘relatively sick, poorly housed, illiterate, innumerate, on low income, unemployed, and with sub-standard communications network’. Only about half of the school-aged children were enrolled at school in 2003 with only about half of these attending regularly. During the past five years at least, the town of Wadeye has earned a reputation in the media as being dysfunctional and the site of festering violence between youth groups. Nevertheless, family and clan is the enduring social unit, alliances are maintained, ceremonies, rites of passage observed, and leaders are apparent and operational.

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19 Yara is situated about 10 kilometres from the township of Wadeye.
20 Mr Jabinee passed away in 2008.
21 I was involved in local Thamarrurr Regional Council censuses of residents conducted in 2005 and again in 2007. It identified a steadily growing population with about 80 babies born each year. Rick Bliss, John Taylor, Kevin Wanganeen, Noeline Dartinga with other women from the Wadeye Palngun Wurnangat Association, and many others were involved in this important exercise and it set an important benchmark for arguing for better housing and services.
22 Taylor and Stanley (2005: 21).
23 Since my research was conducted, improvements have been made with school attendance (although it can fluctuate), and facilities are gradually being up graded.
The first ethnographic descriptions of societal structure in the broader region were collected by Jesuit missionaries at Daly River in 1870 and later by Stanner in the same area, in 1932 and 1934–35. Stanner arrived with Our Lady of the Sacred Heart missionaries in the Port Keats area in 1935 and immediately began to record anthropological aspects of the people. He resumed research amongst the Port Keats people in 1950 and visited on occasions until 1978. The Falkenbergs conducted ethnographic research with Port Keats people in 1952–53 which was published in 1965. It is from these descriptions that I construct details of the people and their leadership during the period 1935 to 1960. I reconstruct the period prior, from 1870 to 1935, from Daly River recordings by anthropologists, missionaries and others. The Daly River people were, and still are, inter-linked in many ways to those from the Port Keats area.

Today, there are ten languages and dialects associated with land contained within the Thamarrurr region as identified by Dixon (2002: xli).24 In the Port Keats area, there are several clans that share a common language. The languages and dialects are illustrated in Map1B. These languages and dialects and the identification code used by Dixon are as follows: Marritjevin (NHb1), Marri Amu (NHb2), Marri Ngarr (NHb3), Magati-ge (NHb3), Menhthe (NHb1), Murrinh-patha (NHd1), Ngan.gi-tjemerri (NHd2), Ngan.gi-wumeri (NHd2), Ngan.gi-kurunggurr (NHd2) and Ngan.gimerri (NHd2). Dixon (2002: xli) refers to these as belonging to the NH Daly River Area Group. It should be noted that Ngan.gi-wumeri speaking people are sometimes referred to as the ‘Murrinh kura people’ (Ward 1983: 44). All Aboriginal

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24 There are many variations on the spelling of words from the region that have been developed by linguists and others. For the sake of consistency, I will utilise the spelling used by linguist Dixon (2002) in his publication, *Australian Languages*. 
people in the region speak at least one of these languages as their primary language, and many people are multilingual.

Dixon (2002: 677) also identifies ‘immediate neighbour’ languages to the region (south of Wadeye rotating anti-clockwise) as Miriwung (ND2), Djamindjung/Ngaliwuru (NCa1), Wagiman (NB11) and Matngele (NHe1). Djamindjung speaking peoples are sometimes referred to as ‘Murrinh Nyuwan people’ (Ward 1983: 44). Other languages further north, important at various times for ceremony, trade and political alliances include Emmi/Merranunggu (NHb1) [Menthe is a dialect of this subgroup], Malak-Malak (NHc), Patjtjamalh (Wadjiginj) and Kandjerramalh (Pungu-Pungu) (NHa), Gungarakanj (NBi), Warray (NBh2), and Larrakiya (Nlc).

The language of Murrinh-patha, due to the establishment of the town of Wadeye in its heartland, is the predominant language spoken in Wadeye and on Murrinh-patha land. It should be stated, however, that where languages are well-known, people from that language group would often speak that language amongst themselves. Such languages are those with large membership, such Marritjevin or Marri Ngarr. Some of the languages, such as Magatige, are almost extinct with only a handful of speakers in some instances, and such languages are rarely used. On occasions, I would spend a full day or days with various groups traveling to estates. Dialogue amongst adults and children was entirely in language, primarily Murrinh-patha, except when they wished to interpret something for me.
Map 1B: Key Language Groups in the Port Keats Region

(Ivory 2008)
Stanner (1979: 32) stated that a number of ‘bands’ from ‘three to four up to twelve or fifteen, depending on the fertility of the area – make up a tribe’. Each band, he argued, belonged to a particular locality, and they had a tendency to ‘move about’ (Stanner 1979: 32). My observations of contemporary structure are that groups tend to reside almost continually at the Wadeye Township with occasional small groups living on or close to their estates.

Stanner (1979: 32) argued that language defined broad tribal affiliation and that it was rare to see a tribe as a ‘formed entity’. In most instances, he maintained they only came together for a ‘feast, a corroboree, a hunt, an initiation, or a formal duel’ (Stanner 1979: 32). The tribe would then break back into its clan formation and continue to roam their own land or, by agreement, the land of immediate neighbours. They did not move aimlessly, but followed the supply of food and seasonal variations as well as planned ceremonial and other gatherings. Stanner (1979: 33) argued that the whole pattern of interaction and movement was a structure of ‘surprising complexity’. Whilst most of the regional population today resides in the Wadeye Township, they retain geographic association to country and kin. Where possible affiliated clans reside near each other and there are ‘clusters’ of language groups; usually situated in spatial relationship to their estate.

I argue that the richness of the land and its resources has shaped the demographics and structure of the people that reside on it. In the Port Keats area, this influenced the emergence of high densities of people living on relatively small estates, within structured groups and with

25 Sutton (2003: 51) argues that Stanner ‘still thought of tribes (as language groups) as congeries of bands’. However, he argues, that ‘this is not sustainable on the evidence’. Nevertheless, he points out that Stanner’s ‘clan/band, estate/range dichotomies have endured’ (Sutton 2003: 51).
symbolic and totemic association to the land. Indeed, the structure or ‘segmental structure’ with ‘multiple principles’ that Stanner (1966: 37) described is foundational. The contemporary social construct of the region is complex and interconnected to ethno-historical influences and changes in the social and physical environment. It is the template of people, country and environment that provides a rich tapestry for the consideration and analysis of local leadership systems and structure.

**Summary and Conclusion**

This chapter has provided an insight into the existing immense, evolving theories on leadership. It is clear that such theories have moved substantially from the focus at one stage on primarily individualistic and charismatic themes, to other areas such as leader-follower relationships and motivations. However, it does not adequately describe the characteristics or functions of Indigenous leadership. Nor does it adequately account for the bases of Indigenous leadership nor how it works.

The chapter has investigated how Western society perceives the concept of leadership. Leadership is one of the most written about cultural notions and, from the diverse theories of its shape and form, it appears to be one of the most complex. Since the earliest period of anthropology there has been a continuing debate, especially in Australia, about what leaders are, what they do, and what functions they perform. This raises additional questions. If there is disagreement in the Western world about what leadership is, then how can it accurately be perceived and understood in other cultures? Further, does this lead to a biased
conceptualisation of leadership by Western researchers who may describe it as vague or even non-existent?

Whilst perceptions of hunter-gatherer societies may have been relatively consistent in early research, it is now more difficult to analyse such societies in general terms due to change and transformation associated with economic and other influences. Neither does the notion of ‘big men’, which Sahlins described in 1963, adequately represent the intricate and complex power and authority structures today. In addition, anthropological and other observations of Indigenous leadership in Australia have shown variation depending on regional group modifications, thus indicating that general theories of Indigenous leadership may present inaccuracies. The chapter has introduced the research site of Port Keats as a thought-provoking location of leadership; even more so as the Australian press at times has referred to it as ‘leaderless’ and dysfunctional.

The thesis intends to test existing theory on leadership against the ethnographical research conducted amongst the people of Port Keats. If existing theoretical frameworks cannot adequately explain or account for the ethnography, then it may present an opportunity for a new perspective of leadership that is able to explain not only the dynamics of leadership at Port Keats, but also perhaps other parts of Indigenous Australia. As mentioned, I am particularly interested in exploring the bases of leadership at Port Keats and whether the concept of ‘deference’ is applicable to this research.
Chapter Two

The Port Keats Study: The Making of Leaders (Past and Present)

This chapter examines the societal structure and practices of the Aboriginal people who own and inhabit the north-west region of the Northern Territory referred to as ‘Port Keats’. Of particular focus will be the systems that reproduce or ‘make’ male leaders. By reviewing the ethnography of early anthropologists from the mid-1930s onwards, and comparing it to my own ethnographic observations in more recent times, I work towards a delineation of the ways in which the Port Keats people and their leadership in the region have accommodated change.

The chapter will explore the landscape and environment the Port Keats people live in and their group-orientated model of local organisation. Whilst analysing the society as a whole, the chapter will also examine how the young are ‘looked after’, ‘grown up’, nurtured and transformed, their rites of passage into manhood, and how individual autonomy is valued as an essential quality within an ‘egalitarian’ hunter-gatherer-type society. It will extrapolate how the society orders leadership and how certain individuals become leaders. In analysing the society past and present, this chapter leads to further analytical possibilities in following chapters, of how, amidst a theme of continuity and permanence, Aboriginal leaders made
decisions that enabled adaptation to occur. In order to unwrap the systems and processes that ‘make’ leadership, it is necessary to visualise the structural forces that determine the norms, values, motivations and mind-set of the Port Keats people.

The Key Collective Decision-making Structure in the Port Keats Region: Clan Groups

Clan groups and their senior membership provide a very important form of collective decision making at Port Keats. Clans are also prominent in the process that ‘makes’ men. The association and importance to each individual of the clan within an egalitarian founded land-based system can be explained as follows.

Because of descent through a patriline each individual has an association and responsibility to religious sites of significance, known in the Murrinh-patha language as ngugumingki. These sites provide people with ngakumarl (spirituality). An individual’s relationship to a local clan totem is shared and such totems are referred to as ngatan. Such sites are within a particular area or estate and essentially define the estate. This area is the land that a group of people is responsible for and owns. Each one of these groupings of men, women and children form a clan. Each clan, as defined by religious and totemic association has the right to hunt and camp on this land. According to Stanner, local clans in the past generally utilised their

26 Aboriginal people at Wadeye often use the term ‘clan’ when they are referring to such groups. It is generally used to describe the patrilineal land-holding totemic unit. Sutton (2003: 156) argues that ‘clan’ as used by Australianists is a ‘convenient cover term, rather than a name for a simply definable, locally universal social structure’.
27 Stanner used the spelling, noiminggi. Falkenberg and Falkenberg (1981: 184–185) used noimingi.
28 Stanner used the spelling, ngakumar. Falkenberg and Falkenberg (1981: 184–185) used nakumal.
29 Referred to as ngat:an or munmak by Falkenberg and Falkenberg (1981:184–185).
own domain following the fluctuating food supply. Then, and today, people, with permission, will utilise resources on another clan’s land. Sometimes clans share a particular *ngugumingki* site or sites.

The genealogical structure of the clans is based on common descent from an apical male ancestor. In the Port Keats area, such genealogical links can usually be traced back, often with the aid of mission records, about three generations. Through the patrilineal land-owning system, children gain responsibility for land through their father. A man is further empowered with rights if he has engaged in ceremonial activity related to his clan land. Although the primary responsibility for land rests with the male members of the clan, women also have good knowledge of the clan estate with particular ceremonial responsibilities and other activities to perform. During my field research, everyone in the clan, men, women and children, came to *ngugumingki* sites.

In a clan situation, men and women are spiritually tied. Members of each clan group will address each other by a specific set of kinship terms. The men of a particular clan are spiritually linked as *ngatan* or *mummak* to the same local totems and their spirits *ngepan* belong to the spirit-home in their own clan area. This is conceptualised by a vision of a spirit-child being torn free from the spirit-home or from the water in the area and revealing itself as *ngarrithngarrith*. Stanner refers to *ngarit* as a ‘life-principle’. The spirit-child will eventually be ‘found’ and brought to the camp where it enters a woman to be born as an

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30 MS 3752: Series 1: Item 82: 12.
31 Falkenberg and Falkenburg (1981) detailed these aspects of spirituality.
32 Falkenberg and Falkenberg (1981: 184) referred to it as *Ngaringarit* or a *Kuramanganat*. 
ordinary child (Falkenberg and Falkenberg 1981: 184). Sacred ceremony objects, *dar Punh* are kept in the same sacred place.\(^{33}\)

Clans, as patrilineal landowning groups, are the key structural unit in the Port Keats region today.\(^{34}\) There are 20 clans with estates and boundaries delineated within the Thamarrurr Council area. Within each clan, there are several key families. In 2003, in company with many local Aboriginal experts on land ownership I began to document and map clan estates in the Thamarrurr region. The exercise was instigated for various reasons including a desire of the leaders and the Northern Territory Government, to move toward a governance structure that could provide better governance, fairer representation, and equal services. The leaders were particularly interested in forming a structure founded on Indigenous governance principles. It also signaled an awareness of economic opportunities related to land and a desire to engage with the wider economic world. The exercise facilitated much discussion about Australian and Indigenous politics and specifically land ownership. It entailed discussion about the composition of a clan group, landowning group and their powers, clarification of the senior landowners, the acquisition and association to land, and relationships to such land and other groups.

\(^{33}\) The importance of *dar Punh* will be articulated later in this chapter.

\(^{34}\) Whilst Stanner (1979: 32) refers to them as ‘bands’, and Barber (2000: 4) as ‘local groups’, most of the people in the region use the terminology ‘clan’ so this term will be used. My own research (Table 2A) has identified the names of the clans, the number of people in the clan (in collaboration with the Thamarrurr Council, Dr John Taylor and others), and the relevant language group (corresponding to Dixon 2002).
As individuals grow older, they are normally seen to be increasingly responsible for the clan land often in conjunction with their brothers and sisters and ‘cousin’ brothers and sisters. During meetings I held with the Yek Diminin landowning group in 2003 both men and women (particularly the middle-aged and elderly) participated in discussions about land issues,
although the final decisions were, in most cases, always made by senior men. These senior men with primary land responsibilities are referred to as *kardu pule.*³⁵ Although these men are primarily recognised in their position as the main landowners, they are also regarded as clan leaders in a wider community sense as well.

### Table 2A: Clan Groups in the Thamarrurr Area of Research, Their Populations, Associated Language Group and Ceremony Group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Clan</th>
<th>Number of People</th>
<th>Language Group</th>
<th>Ceremony Group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Rak Angileni</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Marri Ammu (NHb2)</td>
<td>Wangga</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Rak Kirnmu</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>Murrinh-patha (NHd1)</td>
<td>Dhanba/Malkarrin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Rak Kubiyr</td>
<td>224</td>
<td>Marri Ngarr (NHb3)</td>
<td>Lirrga</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Rak Kulingmrr</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>Marri Ngarr (NHb3)</td>
<td>Lirrga</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Rak Kungarlbavl</td>
<td>137</td>
<td>Marri Ngarr (NHb3)</td>
<td>Lirrga/Wangga</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Rak Kuy</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>Magati-ge (NHb3)</td>
<td>Wangga</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Rak Merrepen</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Ngan.gi-tjemerri (NHd2)</td>
<td>Lirrga</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Rak Nadirri</td>
<td>144</td>
<td>Marritjevin (NHb2)</td>
<td>Wangga</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Rak Nemarluk</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>Ngan.gi-tjemerri (NHd2)</td>
<td>Lirrga</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Rak Nganthawudi</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>Menhthe (NHb1)</td>
<td>Wangga</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Rak Nuthunthu</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>Murrinh-patha (NHd1)</td>
<td>Dhanba/Malkarrin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Rak Perrederr</td>
<td>211</td>
<td>Marritjevin (NHb2)</td>
<td>Wangga</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Rak Thinti</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>Marri Ammu (NHb2)</td>
<td>Wangga</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Rak Wudipuli</td>
<td>310</td>
<td>Marri Ngarr (NHb3)</td>
<td>Lirrga</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Yek Diminin</td>
<td>286</td>
<td>Murrinh-patha (NHd1)</td>
<td>Dhanba/Malkarrin</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

³⁵ For example, clan landowners physically and symbolically clear and maintain their country, always at a premium time to burn. This is a time when the grass has dried enough to burn properly, but also so it is not so tinder dry that the country will be damaged. People only burn land they have a right to burn and it signals not only a time of cleansing and rejuvenation, but also of ownership. Further, it signals to other groups that they, the burners, own the land, are active on it, and are acting out their responsibilities. Someone in Wadeye can see smoke in the distance and know accurately which estate it is and what group is conducting the burning.
<p>| | | | |</p>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>16. Yek Maninh</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>Murrinh-patha (NHd1)</td>
<td>Dhanba/Malkarrin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. Yek Nangu</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>Murrinh-patha (NHd1)</td>
<td>Dhanba/ Wurlthurri/ Malkarrin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. Yek Ngudanimarn</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>Murrinh-patha (NHd1)</td>
<td>Dhanba/Malkarrin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19. Yek Wunh</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>Murrinh-patha (NHd1)</td>
<td>Lirrga</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20. Yek Yederr</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>Magati-ge (NHb3)</td>
<td>Wangga</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>2055</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Some of the clans, for instance *Rak Merrepen* and *Rak Angleni*, are very small in number with 12 and 13 people respectively. This tends toward affiliations, compromises, and arrangements (particularly in terms of leadership) with neighbouring clans. The other factor that needs to be taken into account is the size of the groups that resides on a particular clan’s land. Marriage partners and other affiliates can increase group size. Other clans, particularly *Yek Diminin* and *Rak Kubiyirr* are relatively large in number with totals of 286 and 224. I offer possible explanations and implications for such wide difference in population size and some of these issues will be explored further during this thesis. Such size differentiation and its relatedness to issues such as leadership, power and authority will also be analysed.

**Social Organisation**

The social organisation prior to 1936 was presumed by Stanner (1936: 186–188) to be one of local patrilineal hordes, patrilineal local totemic clans, patrilocal and patriarchal families, and

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36 For instance, two clans with very small members have very vocal women who undertake many of the daily management and leadership tasks. Another two clans, whose leaders mostly reside in Darwin, have delegated some key decision making powers to leaders of neighbouring clans.

37 As Frances Morphy (2008) suggests, pre-colonisation, clans would probably not have reached such large and possibly unsustainable sizes. Clan leaders at Port Keats today agree. They argue that in the past there would have been division and reorganisation into smaller groups.
two exogamous patrilineal moieties. Later, some of the language groups within the area adopted a system that included eight subsections, matrilineal non-cult totemism, and a practice of marriage with sister’s son’s daughter.

The introduction of moieties and subsections in the Port Keats area (by all accounts directly from the Djamindjung people and other groups toward Western Australia and Central Australia), new marriage rules, and the adoption of new kinship occurred in about 1915.\(^{38}\) This may have been due to increased interaction with groups to the south and west as cattle stations were established. However, the subsection practices appear to have waned during the 1950s. Stanner commented that: \(^{39}\)

\[
\ldots \text{the Murinbata have converted the sub-section system so that it will conform with the pre-existing kinship system while maintaining the same basic style of socialization of kinship; they have made such minimal modifications of terminology as will “fit” this conversion, and they have seen and followed up, some logical possibilities of additional and alternative marriages made possible by the conversion.}
\]

The two patrilineal moiety groups in the Port Keats region referred to by Stanner (1936: 190) are *Karrthin* (Chicken-hawk) and *Tiwungku* (Eagle-hawk). The Falkenbergs described the Murrinh-patha as having a moiety system and a ‘modified subsection system’ whilst other

\(^{38}\) See Falkenberg and Falkenberg (1981: 196).
\(^{39}\) MS3752: Series 1: Item 82: 7.
tribes such as ‘the Maritjevin and Marijadi’ having ‘vigorously opposed’ both (Falkenberg and Falkenberg 1981: 73). The land-owning groups were one moiety or the other. Generally, the Karrthin moiety groups were located toward the seaward side, whilst the Tiwungku groups tended to be inland, although this is not always the case. Whilst the Murrinh-patha embraced the moiety system, groups further to the north, such as the Marritjevin, did not.

Felix Bunduck, a Murrinh-patha leader, explained that today many people, especially the young and middle-aged, no longer know their moiety or sub-section name, however he said that people in his generation, aged in their sixties or older still utilise it. 40 This could be useful, he argued, for those maintaining a wide network of relationships. Felix said that when he walked down the street in Timber Creek, people would call out his sub-section or ‘skin’ name – ‘Thelyerri!’ To him this was important because people ‘know him’ in that country and can socially categorise him. It was advantageous to Felix because he could engage with them or request favours and assistance.

**Family**

The Falkenbergs (1981: 68–75) utilised further categorisations of the society as ‘hordes, gangs, and fireplaces’ and whilst these terms are not commonly used within anthropological circles today, such segmentation can be observed. 41 A ‘horde’ in the region consisted of various categories of people centered on given local clansmen and their wives and children.

40 Mr Bunduck passed away in 2008. He was a prominent leader in both the Indigenous domain and in mainstream local governance often acting as a spokesperson on important occasions.
41 The Falkenberg’ terminology of hordes, gangs and fireplaces should be contrasted with the use of ‘horde’ to mean band by Radcliffe-Brown and others.
(Falkenberg and Falkenberg 1981: 68). The Falkenbergs referred to sub-groups within the horde as ‘gangs’ and each gang usually consisted of a man, his wife or wives, and their children (Falkenberg and Falkenberg 1981: 71). A number of the man’s clan ngatan (ego’s brother, father’s brother’s son, mother’s sister’s son) would also, together with their wives, be admitted to the family group over time.

Some relationships carry high degrees of responsibility and importance. Marriage can define a new and important web of relationships for groups of people. One’s brother-in-law is a primary example. Wife’s brother and husband’s brother are both referred to as nangkun and they are important allies in intra- and inter-clan negotiations and when dealing with disputes and conflict. A wife’s husband (as are all his brothers) is also categorised as nangkun. Likewise, the term purrima is used to describe one’s wife and all of her sisters. A woman in describing her husband’s sister uses the same term. These relationships are important not only in managing conflict but in acquiring increased access to resources.

A person’s son or daughter is referred to as wakal. Nephews and nieces have the same term, wakal, as have nephews and nieces in-law (the son or daughter of wife’s sister and the son and daughter of husband’s brother). The son of ones wife’s brother and the son of their husband’s sister are referred to as wakal muluk. Likewise, the daughter of your wife’s brother and the daughter of your husband’s sister are referred to as wakal newuy.

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42 Ngatan and wakal are primarily kin terms.
Today, as in Stanner’s time, each Murrinh-patha family group organises its economic activities independently of the other family groups of the clan. The food that the women collect or purchase in the local supermarket is usually distributed among their husbands and children. However, if a man shoots a kangaroo or substantial numbers of other prey, for example geese, the meat will usually be distributed amongst other members of the clan group and also amongst close in-laws from other clan groups depending on the size or number of the prey.

All of the adult men of the same family group have strong ties to each other. Normally they belong to the same local clan, address each other by the same kinship term ngatan, and refer to the married women of their own family group by the same term purima and to the children of the family group by the same term wakal. The family-groups are then further subdivided into what the Falkenbergs described as ‘fire-units’ that would usually sleep around the one fire at night (Falkenberg and Falkenberg 1981: 72).

Various levels of avoidance are observed. The most common avoidance is between a male and his mother-in-law and between brother and sister. Brothers have appropriate behaviour patterns to observe as have other kin. Some avoidance rules could gradually be removed over time by gifts known as nandji43 and tawur (Falkenberg and Falkenberg 1981: 54–59) although this practice appears to have waned.44

43 Nandji in this instance refers to ‘gifts’ exchanged as part of the nanthi kulu process.
44 On one occasion when travelling on a plane back to Wadeye a middle-aged leader was jokingly teasing his mother-in-law. I later asked him if this was appropriate and he said that in some situations particularly if the
**Totemism**

Totems as symbols are powerful binding agents linking the various segments and relationships. Stanner (Stanner 1966: 31–32) observed five types of totemism as follows:

- personal or conceptional totemism referred to as *mir*, linking an individual with a non-human entity;
- sex totemism linking all men or women to a class of non-human entities;
- clan totemism where all members of each exogamous, patrilineal clan was linked with a large class of animal or natural entities connected with particular places in the clan estate;
- moiety totemism where all persons, whether male or female, in each patrilineal moiety jointly possessed a totem distinguishing them from all members of the other moiety; and
- subsection totemism where all members of each subsection or *nginipun*, of which there were eight, jointly possessed a class of non-human entities which were not connected locally with places.\(^45\)

By associating a totem with a set of people and making them into a group, it meant they ‘can operate, or be operated on’, by virtue of the totemic sign (Stanner 1966: 33). Totems have been extended in contemporary situations to activities such as football.\(^46\)

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\(^45\) woman was of strong character and wit, it was not frowned upon. Further he said – ‘I always joke with her ... she knows me. She is a very smart lady’. Such ‘joking’ behaviour may also be a sign of respect.

\(^46\) Today spelt *nginipuh*.

For example many of the *Rak Nangu* clan members support the Adelaide Crows Australian Rules football team; the crow is a key symbolic bird for them.
Ceremonial Exchange

*Nanthi kulu* is a type of relationship contract that establishes an order between family groups both intra- and inter-clan (Desmarchelier 2000: 22). It is represented by an exchange of goods and it acknowledges fundamental relationships and obligations. The practice of *nanthi kulu* was first observed by Stanner (1966:35) who noted that valuables were ‘held or touched’ (by men and women) in a given sequence and passed on to individuals in an adjoining clan.

The exchange is between family groups within clans and in only one of two directions; northwest and southeast. *Nanthi kulu* is practised as two forms; one is a public act and women and children have knowledge of it. The other is conducted only among the men and during ceremony. *Nanthi kulu* with ‘saltwater groups’ follows an anti-clockwise direction and a clockwise direction with ‘inland groups’.

The importance of *nanthi kulu*, according to the leaders, is that it gives family groups and clans, mutual respect and recognition. It signifies a web of relationships drawing the clans into trade links that are another bond in the Thamarrurr structure. It assists in defining relationships and status.

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47 *Nanthi kulu*, is the term for trade in the Port Keats region. *Wurnan* is often used further southwest. The trade is interlinked.

48 The exchange system as described is similar and connected to the Ngarinyin *wurnan*.

49 Among items traded are pearl shell, boomerangs and ochre. A treasured item today is a ‘love potion’ that can only be made by those with special powers, sometimes referred to as ‘magic’, and when used on the body, can attract and excite the opposite sex. Both men and women use it. One informant said that sometimes when they trade something, it is not seen again. However, he did know of occasions when some items have ended up in Central Australia, Amata (community in the north of South Australia) and other parts of South Australia.

50 Elkin (in Falkenberg, J. 1962: 9) stated that it represents ‘friendship’. I argue that the *nanthi kulu* is a much more complex conceptualisation.
Gregory Mollingin explained how \textit{nanthi kulu} works within his clan, the \textit{Kardu Diminin}. This land-owning clan of the township of Wadeye comprises eight family groups. Three of these families (Mollingin, Kolumboort and Bunduck) are considered to be from \textit{lumbu itchi}, that is, ‘high country’, and have \textit{nanthi kulu}. The \textit{nanthi kulu} exchange continues with other groups within the \textit{Diminin} clan (Perdjert, Narburup, Kuruwul, Pultchen/Dulla, and Mollingin) who are referred to as \textit{lumbu thamu}, from the ‘low country’. A conceptual representation of this model is in Figure 2A.
Figure 2A: An Example of Indigenous Ceremonial Trade (nanthi kulu) Practice Highlighting Progression through the Yek Diminin Clan Families

Key to key family groups within the Kardu Diminin clan and the associated nanthi kulu exchange line

Kardu lumbu thamul (Low country)
A – Perdjert
B – Narburup

Kardu Diminin leaders have always stressed that although there is nanthi kulu between families in a certain direction, 'all the country is owned by everyone' (Kulumboort 2005: pers. com)
Alliances and Reciprocity

Whilst the moiety categorisation as a determinant of kin has waned at Port Keats, it remains as a key classifier of reciprocal responsibilities, particularly with regard to ceremony. For instance, a man from one moiety relies on a man from another moiety (either Karrthin or Tiwungku) to paint marks on his body at ceremonial time. Similarly, a man wishing to have his son initiated has to arrange for another man from another ceremonial group to perform crucial parts of the rite.

Land belonging to a particular clan is categorised as being one moiety or the other. However, whilst in some instances, clans of the same moiety often are considered as continuous in a territorial sense, in others cases; they are discontinuous (Stanner 1977: 5). Where they are continuous, they could cross language-boundaries and Stanner (1977: 5) maintained that this could be evidence of ‘growth and fission’.

The nurturing of alliances is still of great importance today. Clan affiliation remains the fundamental principle, as are kin affiliations and responsibilities established through marriage.
However, many of the adults and teenagers that lived in mission dormitories or went to school together have built friendships of enduring quality ‘outside’ of the kin and marriage system.

**The Individual**

The individual right to have equal opportunity within the group-structured culture is valued. On one occasion, I witnessed an angry young man hit a senior leader and a kin relation of his in the back of the head with a tin of meat at a public place. My expectation was that this would result in severe repercussions for the younger man. However, nothing happened. I was later informed that the older man had missed the funeral of one of their joint relatives and that he was ‘in the wrong’. This individual’s right to vent his anger, despite his junior status, was seen to have been positively acted out.

Individual identity and positioning is important. In the early days, contact with others was prefixed by a defined procedure. One would give a personal name, moiety name, subsection name and then would communicate their *da*, father’s-father’s country. One might then explain their *kangathi*, mother’s-mother’s country. Each individual during their lifetime, would progress through various stages of social status (Stanner 1966). Status, according to Stanner (1966: 13) was a ‘locus in a system of life with associated powers, privileges, duties and a given magnitude of social value’. Transitive operations would be set in course at certain times with the object of ‘moving youths’ to a higher social status (Stanner 1966: 13). Thus, in the early days, individuals would have a kin-based locus, as well as a status determined by other factors including age and ceremonial acumen.
Stanner in his writings often described certain individuals as being strong leaders, spirited characters, and exceptional fighters, and questioned whether they were ‘trustworthy’ or not. He paid homage to those who assisted him with his research such as Nym Bunduck and Harry Kulumboort. Tjimari or ‘Waggon’ was a man who had sorcery powers and was a ‘superb and very brave spear-fighter’, ‘dancer’, ‘good artist’, ‘restless wanderer’ and a ‘politician and agent provocateur’ (Stanner 1973: 14–15). Stanner (1979: 67–105) immortalised the Aboriginal leader, Durmagan, in his book _White Man got no Dreaming_ as did Idriess (1935; 1941) in his publications about Nemarluk. The writings of Stanner and Idriess illustrate a prominent Aboriginal viewpoint during these years of the right of the individual to speak their mind and initiate certain actions. Individuality however was acted out in a group context for without the support of others, the individual was vulnerable. Nevertheless, whilst leadership was founded on the given variables of kin and status, and the group-based contextuality, it could be enhanced on an individual basis by personal qualities and skills. This, I argue, is still the case.

**Large Gatherings and Interaction**

Governance matters today are usually sorted within formal meetings of elected and delegated clan representatives. Negotiated decision making often occurs outside of the meetings in the form of ‘caucausing’. In earlier times, congregations of people would occur often at times of ceremony, or dispute resolution. Stanner explained: 53

52 See Chapter Five.
53 MS 3752: Series 1: Item 82: 15.
Trading always goes on in the background of these inter-tribal meetings … spears, waxes, necklaces, stone axes, knives, pearl-shell ornaments, belts made of human hair, and many other artifacts.

The tribes would come from afar and meet at an agreed venue often on the floodplains of the Moyle River (Kundjil 2005: pers. com). Stanner mentions that the ‘Moiil’ (tribe) sent in ‘contingents’.\(^{54}\) There was ceremonial interaction with groups to the immediate and far north to Darwin, west to Kununurra, and south to Timber Creek. Stanner, according to Maddock (1985: 135), was told by Murrinh-patha people that the ceremonies were important because it made young people ‘understand’. Maddock (1985: 154) argues that ceremonies of this type, and the rituals, are ‘a representation in miniature of the whole structure of existence’.

**Warfare and Conflict**

Port Keats, from the turn of the century, had a reputation as a hostile wilderness populated by ‘wild blacks’. Certainly, Stanner records active disputes, conflicts and ‘wars’ in the area upon his arrival and thereafter. Deborah Bird Rose (1991) examined the role and reason for Indigenous warfare mainly in the Victoria River Downs (VRD) region. VRD is a relatively close trading and cultural partner of the people of the Port Keats region and can be used for comparative purposes. Rose (1991: 104) points out that warfare occurred in that region:

\(^{54}\) MS 3752: Series 1: Item 82: 15.
… not only as a result of conflicts to do with women, but also as a matter of territorial expansion, conflict over resources, and conflict over rights to ceremonial matters. Most of the hostilities seemed to result from people being pushed out of their own countries, seeking refuge in other countries, and being unable to live well in over-crowded and resource-scant conditions.

The wars referred to as ‘blackfella wars – *waringari* –’ were, Rose argues, ‘central to Aboriginal life both during the first decades of European invasion and also prior to that period’ (Rose 1991: 101). Rose (1991: 115) argues that ‘demographic imbalances’ caused by disease or warfare may have been dealt with by ‘succession, fusion and fission’. Strong groups would take over the country of weakened or decimated groups. Rose believes that once cattlemen began to occupy the area, the wars abated due to various factors. The ‘wars’ however, may have been aggravated by the arrival of the cattle barons pushing people off their country onto other people’s country.

The reports of Stanner detail warfare within clans and amongst clans that was prevalent particularly pre-mission and immediately post-mission. Fighting that occurs today predominantly involves younger people and this will be detailed in Chapter Six.
Religion, Ceremony and Ritual

Aboriginal people from the Port Keats region believe that ‘generations of Murinbata are reincarnations of beings who were created in the old dream-time’ (Falkenberg and Falkenberg 1981:185). Every generation experienced anew the creative past as active participants in the sacred ceremonies. Past, present and future, they said, are ‘fused into a timeless whole’ (Falkenberg and Falkenberg 1981: 185). Kunmanggur (sometimes also referred to as Kanamgek or Dimgek), the Rainbow-Snake Man, is believed to be ‘the giver of life’ as well as the source of authority and tradition as observed by Stanner (1936: 194). Kunmanggur was later displaced, Stanner (1966: 56) argues, as the paramount cult by that of Mutjinga, The Old Woman or Kale Neki, the ‘mother of us all’ and the associated bullroarer.

Socialisation procedures and initiations in the form of ceremonies, the most important being known publicly as Punj, were occurring during Stanner’s visitations to Port Keats (Stanner 1966: 3). As Stanner (1966: 4) pointed out, the facts of the ceremony are ‘dense with meanings’. Whilst it was, and still is, an initiation ceremony, Punj was also a higher-level indoctrination into the world enabling the young to ‘understand’ (Stanner 1966: 3). Such ceremony occurred once a year, and could take from one to two months to complete, depending on several factors including ‘the will of the ritual leader (kirman)’ (Stanner 1966: 5). There were secret and public sequences and roles assigned to a range of people (Stanner 1966: 5).

55 Spelt today as Punh.
56 I was advised that more influential leaders who had access to various resources, could maintain and manage ceremonies for longer periods.
57 Spelt today as kirrmarn – but I heard it pronounced during my ethnographic research as kiddaman.
There were two other initiation ceremonies held prior to participation in Punj. The first, Djaban (lasting about 2–4 weeks), occurred when boys were aged about 8 to 10 years; the second at puberty (lasting 1–3 months) and then Punj occurred from 16 years onwards (Stanner 1966: 19). All were a variation on the themes of ‘withdrawal, transformation and return’ (Stanner 1966: 19). The intent of the first was to ‘strike fear’ of the unknown, of men, and of life; the second to implant self-respect, endurance of privation and pain, and a knowledge of their dependence on others; and the third, as described to transform and move individuals to another knowledge, understanding, and status level (Stanner 1966: 19–20).

‘Traditional’ circumcisions, according to Stanner (1966: 109) ceased at Port Keats about the mid-1940s with advent of the hospital.\(^{58}\)

‘Increase’ rites, according to Stanner (1966: 31) practised in other regions, did not gain eminence in the Port Keats area. Another rite of significance was an intricate death ceremony that lost significance in the 1960s.\(^{59}\) Worms (1986: 162–163) explained that:

\[\ldots\] the hair was cut from a dead person and his body was dried out on a platform of branches about two metres off the ground. All his goods, except his stone axe, were broken and thrown into the fire. Once the corpse was dry, the arm bones were taken away and all the other bones were crushed and burnt along with other remaining parts of the body. The ashes thus obtained were wrapped up in bark and kept by the

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\(^{58}\) An initiate was circumcised at the local hospital by an Aboriginal health worker. Ritual was still conducted at the ceremony grounds.

\(^{59}\) Although Stanner (1966: 118) argues that it actually began to significantly decline in the 1940s.
family. After about two years, there was celebrated the final ceremony called *mulunu or magendi*.

Worms (1986: 163) detailed how during *Mulunu*, a circular ground was cleared, a shallow hole dug where the remains were buried. Men spiralled around dancing, beating down on the tomb with their feet. The spirit of the dead person, *ni-djaban*, was retired then forever into the land of the dead.

Stanner (1966: 40) also mentions three other ceremonies that apparently ceased. The *Karamala*, a first-stage initiation and the *Tjimburki* rite, centered on circular excavations in the earth, were last performed in approximately the 1920s. The third ceremony with circular arrangements of stones may have been, according to Stanner (1966: 54), connected to *Kunmanggur*. Aspects of these rites may have been ‘transferred’ to emerging ceremonies as they died out (Stanner 1966: 54). He also argues that there may have been a ‘historical succession of cults’ over a century (Stanner 1966: 54). Some rock-art he points out, are related to the *Kunmanggur* myth, but others with a strong affinity to *Wandjina* figures of the Kimberleys could not be connected to rites that he was observing in the 1950s (Stanner 1966: 54–55).

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60 I was taken to one of these sites by some men and women in 2006. Whilst they were able to provide some basic details, they were unclear on the exact purpose of the ceremony. The current *kardu pule*, a senior man aged about 45, said that the ceremony had not been enacted in his lifetime.
Ceremonial activities today revolve around three tripartite ceremonial groups and their song genres. They are the *Dhanba/Wurlthurri/Malkarrin* (associated with the Murrinh-patha language group), *Wangga* (Magati-ge, Marritjevin and Marri Ammu), and the *Lirrga* (Marri Ngarr). Individual clans are categorised to one of these three ceremonial groups (see Table 2A). Furlan (2005: 9) argues that the evolution of these ‘tripartite reciprocal exchange’ arrangements may have occurred as a response to accommodate ‘new indigenous social subjects’ into the environment of the mission. Most of these groups had been in a state of warfare and for them to congregate and live at the mission site together was a massive challenge. I argue that further transformation occurred as the mission evolved. As cattle work opportunities decreased, Port Keats in a sense became an ‘island’ of isolation. Road and air access was difficult out of the region and people were less inclined to walk the long distances that they had done in the past. By establishing and strengthening the triadic ceremonial group model, the Port Keats region was almost socially and religiously self-sustainable.

The *Malkarrin* songs came as a religious and cultural revelation to a local Murrinh-patha man called Mollingin (Furlan 2005: 77). Mollingin visualised through a dream, the arrival of the

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61 A further dance group referred to as *Palgun*, which previously may have formed a fourth group, appears now to have merged with *Lirrga*. The *Palgun* genre belonged to the Yek Wunh and Rak Nuthunhthu clan groups. Note also that, due to displacement in the past, there are a few instances where there are exceptions. An example is with the clan group *Yek Wunh*, who speak *Murrinh-patha* but dance *lirrga*.

62 The three genres of ceremonial groups and their songs appear to have evolved in relatively recent times, possibly in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Interestingly, Stanner (1966: 108) from his research conducted in the 1950s only makes fleeting references to ‘*wangga*’ as an initiatory style ‘somehow linked to the Daly River’ and ‘*lirrga*’ as ‘the song and dance’ associated with ‘*manbanggoi*’ in his footnotes. He mentions the ‘*mindirrini*’ as being identical to ceremonies performed by groups to the east and south-west but there is no reference to *Dhanba* (Stanner 1966: 108).

63 According to Mark Crocombe (pers. com) this process was gradual with some groups ‘coming in’ for a few weeks and then moving back to their country again. Over time though, residence in Wadeye became permanent.
Holy Mary to the area. Some of the places and language involved supposedly emanated from Western Australia, despite the fact the Mollingin himself had never been there. It might be argued that Mollingin was establishing not only a new song genre, but also a strong affiliation and negotiating position with the Church and increased prestige and status for himself and his group.

The *Wangga* genre originates north and south from the coastal Daly region. These songs and dances articulate fundamental themes of death and regeneration (Marett 2005: 1). The *Dhanba* and *Lirrga* genres on the other hand are localised forms of songs and thought patterns incorporated from outside the region (Marett 2005: 25). Treloyn (2003: 208–220), describes the *Jadmi Junba* song cycle from the Kimberley region of northwest Australia and these songs probably provided inspiration for the *Dhanba* genre per stockmen returning to Port Keats. I was informed by prominent Aboriginal leaders, Jabinee (2006: pers. com) and Lee (2004: pers. com), that *Lirrga* songs and performances have linkages and possible inspiration sources from the Beswick/Katherine/Pine Creek areas.  

Each of the three ceremonial groups is reliant on each other to conduct rituals, such as during initiation. Much of the ceremonial activity that used to occur, pre-1930s, was undertaken during the dry season.

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64 Mr Robert Lee was a prominent and well-respected Jawoyn leader who passed away in 2006. He was involved in complex negotiations for Aboriginal land and development in the Katherine region. Mr Jabinee, another leader who was held in high regard particularly for his work with the Northern Land Council, and in the ceremonial sphere, passed away in 2008.
In those days, in order to attend a ceremony one had to, in most cases, walk considerable distances. Today, most people will drive or fly by aircraft. Performances of Wangga, Lirrga and Dhanba assist in delineating, defining and ameliorating the relationships between the three main ceremonial groups. They enable life to go on within a general framework of reciprocation, recognition and respect. As individuals and their affiliates extend their networks and engagement, the ceremonial scene may evolve even further. Certainly, in recent times, people from Port Keats have participated in some ceremonies on the Tiwi Islands, Milingimbi, and the Elliot/Newcastle Waters area.

Whilst ceremony groups perform certain rituals and songs for each other, such reciprocation does not follow a strict pattern. It depends on one’s relationship to another person or group. Whilst such relationships may be founded on kinship relations, it can also be reaffirming bonds developed through friendship, respect and association over time (Nganbe 2008: pers. com).

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65 A leader, Felix Bunduck (2006: pers. com) told me that when he was a young man (in the 1950s), he walked from Port Keats to Darwin and returning via Daly River on a number of occasions attending various ceremonies along the way. He said that in Darwin there was a very important ceremony that was held at various times with the Larrakiya language group and other Aboriginal groups from as far away as Arnhem Land. Ceremonies were conducted at a site near Kulaluk, Myilly Point and at another site at or ‘near the old Gardens Oval’. I was later informed by another song man, Laurence Kulumboort (2006: pers. com) that an emanating site for the ‘big snake’ also referred to as Kanamkek, is in the springs emanating from the present-day Darwin Botanical Gardens water fountain.
Sorcery and Magic

Sorcery and magic was prevalent at the time of Stanner’s arrival. It was used for many purposes; some malicious, some well intended. Stanner (1946) reported a multitude of uses including: 66

… to calm shy geese, make a puny baby grow, make reluctant women eager for love, make enemies sick and die, bring lightening and thunder to smite their foes, preserve the spiritual substance of food, make fruits, animals, and plants reappear.

When Stanner (1973: 3) first arrived in the Daly area in 1932, he reported that there was an air of ‘warlockry and poison’ and any death was linked to the ‘human use of dark powers’. Most people today continue to be fearful of sorcery, apprehensive of its use, and know (or suspect) those who can use it. The dangerous elements of sorcery are not referred to often; however the positive use of ‘magic’ items can still be found. 67 My observations are that men classified as kirrman appear more often to have sorcery-type knowledge than others.

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67 A particular ‘love potion’ that is rubbed on one’s body to attract the opposite sex is often used; and ‘exported’ to places such as Kununurra and beyond.
The ‘Making’ of Young Men

In order to understand the complexity of life development and progression toward leadership status, it is necessary to examine movement through certain age-categories, rites of passage, and ceremonial advancement.

Age-grades

Males and females in the Port Keats region progress through life in specific age-gradings (see Figure 2B). Some of the terms attributed to each category, particularly during childhood, refer to physical capabilities such as rolling over and standing up. In later life, the terms may refer to ceremonial progression or accumulation of prestige and status through other factors. Progressional markers can include physical change, for example grey hair.\(^68\) It sometimes can also occur when individuals take more responsibility for people and country.

Stanner\(^69\) identified fifteen ‘age-divisions’ from birth to age five and six.\(^70\) Male babies were referred to as *lidul* (stage 1) when first born. At this stage, they would have been carried around in paper bark or a coolimon at this stage. They then progressed to *werdamad* (2), *wudadoi* (3) when first named, and began to move about and roll around, *dembinji madamum* (4) when they could turn over and lie on their stomach, *kanawup dim* (5) when they could sit up and lie down, and *mambindap* (6) when they first started to crawl. They were *dimbuding* (7) when they were crawling, then *dimbindut* (8a), *dembindut* (8b), and *wuranpudang* (9),

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\(^68\) Mathias Nemarluk (2006: pers. com.)

\(^69\) Stanner MS 3752: Series 5: Item 23.

\(^70\) Perhaps there were so many stages identified during this phase because pre-mission life may have been fragile with relatively high mortality rates due to harsh conditions and disease. Each stage may have marked a better chance of the child surviving.
when they first started to stand but could not walk. A key period generally referred to as
*mamai* then commenced with the stage *piratot pirim* (10) when the child began to walk and
*wililime* (11) when the child first began to eat food. The child would be about one year old at
the start of this period. They were *miwalamait* (12) when they began to ask for and consume
food and water instead of mother’s milk. *Nungampinat* (13) was when they started to run, then
*tarami* (14a), *tarmu ngala* (14b), and *ngala* (15) when they were regularly walking and
running about.

The period of *mamai* then ended and a pre-pubescent period known as *lamatingi yeri*
commenced. The youngster then progressed through *djauan* until the circumcision period
known as *tjambitj*. *Kigai* was the post-circumcision period and then *kadupunj*. *Kadume* and
*palngunma* marked the stage when one got married. *Wakalma* was when a man became a
father and *kake* marked middle age. An elderly man was referred to as *ngalandar*. Stanner
then referred to the stage when someone was very old and ‘finished’ as *pule*. He may have
meant *pulen pulen* as *pule* refers to a senior clan leader and nowadays at least, they are not
necessarily ‘old’.\(^7\)

There has been some transformation in categorisation within contemporary Port Keats society.
Whilst there is core knowledge of age-groupings, classifications, and progressions, the quality
of the knowledge varies with a general increase in knowledge depending on the age of the

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\(^7\) Falkenberg (1962: 177) did not use the fifteen stage categories that Stanner was given. He posited that the
youngest age-grade is *konungganga* and this was used for both sexes. He stated that after that the male stages
were *mamai*, *kigai*, *kadu*, *kake*, *ngalandar*, and *pule*. All of the terms appear to be not in common use; however
when I went through them all with a senior Port Keats man in 2008, he had heard of all of them and knew what
they meant.
person supplying the data. Most people agreed that today there are the following Murrinh-patha age-groupings: wakal (birth–3 years), mamai (3–5/6), lamatingu (5/6–9), tjambitj (9–12), kigai (12–17), kake (18–40), ngalander (old men usually over 60), and pulen pulen for very old men. The term kardu pule is used to designate a senior landowner. A higher category of song-man or ceremonial man is referred to as kardu kirrmarn. This term is said, by elders today, to have emanated from the south-west and could have arrived when a particular new wave of ceremony was introduced. The term, kardu murnu, was often used in the past to describe an older man; however, its use is not as prevalent today. The term translates to mean ‘the backbone of the clan’ (Nganbe 2008: pers. com).
Figure 2B: Senior Men
Photo showing senior ceremony-man (classified as *kardu ngalander*), Les Kundjil (left) and Richard Tcherna (*kardu pule*) after an intensive day of *Punh* ceremonies at Port Keats in 2005 (photo taken by Ivory).
Figure 2C: Contemporary Murrinh-patha Male Age Categories

Murrinh-patha Age Categories
As they age, young boys progress from the outer circle toward the centre. Older men in the centre have superior knowledge and experience.

(Nganbe and Ivory 2008. Illustration by Garling)
The fifteen infant stages outlined from Stanner’s research are rarely used today. Some people, particularly older women, will articulate the terms; however, the knowledge of such terms is not widespread. The term \textit{wakal}, for babies, is commonly used by both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people at Wadeye today. However, senior woman Theodora Narndu, told me that it is often used out of context to its original meaning. Theodora said that Catholic nuns in the mission days began using it as a general term for children. It can have deeper meaning associated with responsibility, affiliation to particular sites and country and kinship association through the patriline. One particular meaning of \textit{wakal}, for instance, relates to particular in-law relationships (Falkenberg and Falkenberg 1981: 48). In another context for the Murrinh-patha people, it can also mean son or daughter (Falkenberg 1962: 201). In a further context, it can also mean ‘spirit-child’ (Falkenberg 1962: 238). The nurturing process during these early years is illustrated in the following diagram.
As the child gets older, they are exposed to knowledge and skills that will assist them in later life. This process may be illustrated as follows.
Rites of Passage

Rites of passage at Port Keats are of key importance in the ‘making’ of men and leaders. It is a celebration of the passage of ‘death’ (as a child) and rebirth and the subsequent change in
social position, sexual rights, and, as van Gennep (1910) described, an ‘opening of the doors’. Interestingly, given the close affiliation of the Port Keats people to Catholicism, van Gennep (1910) argued that such transitions occur in many societies including the Catholic religion with preliminary sanctification and removal from the profane to sacred world.\footnote{72}

Rites of passage in the heuristic schema, as proposed by van Gennep (1910), follow a three-fold pattern of separation, transition or rites of threshold and incorporation. It should be noted that, with some variations, most male persons undergo initiations and rites today that are similar to those conducted and observed by Stanner during the 1950s and probably earlier.\footnote{73}

Despite Stanner’s (1971: 3) argument that ‘rites themselves did not, and doubtless could not, long survive intact the coming of Christianity’, they nevertheless have survived in some form.\footnote{74}

During these initiation rites, there is a separation from the previous environment particularly from one’s mother. It is accompanied by seclusion on the one hand and support by elders and compatriots on the other. There is physical and mental pressure during which time, according to Stanner, there is a notion that the initiates are temporarily ‘non-human’ and have the form of ‘wild dogs’.\footnote{75}

During the ceremonies, there is instruction in law, totems, ceremonies, myths, sacred objects. Old people saw boys and youths as ‘uncomplete and unfinished persons’; by unveiling of the sacra through initiation, they were transformed.\footnote{76} The initiate,

\footnote{72} Such association with the Catholic faith was raised during an initiation ceremony I attended at Port Keats in 2005. \footnote{73} Although the complexity and length of the ceremony has apparently been transformed. \footnote{74} Stanner MS 3752: Series 1: Item 325: 3. \footnote{75} Ibid, Item 296: 6. \footnote{76} Ibid, Item 320: 2.
depending on which group is conducting the ceremony may encounter mutilation (tooth extraction, circumcision or sub-incision). Towards the later part of the ceremony, there is resurrection into a new way of being. He can never go back to what he was before and must have new relationships with his mother and sisters. Overall, it is a momentous change in the life of a young person.

Such initiation is paramount to the ‘making’ of men, and leaders. In order to understand the role of initiation as a major facilitator of life progression, it is necessary to analyse the key stages involved.

Initiation ceremonies for males today generally occur about once a year. During the period of research (2002–2006), ceremonies were held in 2003, 2005 and 2006. In 2004, they did not occur due to various reasons. In 2005, they were held in two separate places, for different initiates, but with many of the same senior participants. In 2003, the ceremony was held at the ceremony ground just outside of the township of Wadeye. In 2005, the first ceremony held in September, was conducted at Peppiminarti. During October 2005, the ceremony was at Wadeye.\footnote{I was fortunate to be invited to attend secret stages of this ceremony.} The organisers and song men, \textit{kardu kirrman}, of each ceremony varied. In 2003, the song men were from the \textit{Lirrga} ceremony group. At the Peppiminarti ceremony, the song men were also principally from the \textit{Lirrga} ceremony group. At the 2005 Wadeye ceremony, the lead song men were from the \textit{Wangga} group, however ‘back-up’ singers were from the \textit{Dhanba} group.
At the 2003 ceremony, the initiates were generally from the communities of Wadeye and Palumpa. At the Peppiminarti ceremony in 2005, the initiates were from across the region including areas in the Timber Creek region. At the Wadeye 2005 ceremony, the initiates were from what might be termed, the ‘Thamarrurr collection’. Initiates were from the following clan groups: *Nardirri* (3), *Kuy* (3), *Diminin* (6), *Wunh* (1), *Kungarlbarl* (2), *Yeddairt* (2), *Maninh* (1), *Nangu* (1), *Tchindi* (1) and one other unidentified. Thus, they represented, of the three ceremony groups, the *Dhanba* and *Wangga* categories.

My observations of the Wadeye 2005 initiation ceremony are as follows.\(^78\) The ‘boss’ for this ceremony was Boniface Perdjert, a *Yek Diminin* senior clan leader. There were also other ‘bosses’ with various roles and responsibilities as will be described. Boniface was the ‘boss’ who one had to seek permission from to attend the ceremony and the person who decided, with consensual endorsement from others, who viewed certain sacred objects. He appeared obliged to ‘look after’ us and ensure that we acted responsibly and understood what was happening at all times. In company with Patrick Nudjulu (the senior *Rak Kuy* clan leader), Boniface gave orders such as permission for initiates (he referred to them as *kardu ngeegh*) to go into the bush to relieve themselves.

Material objects associated with the ceremony came from far and wide. One sacred object had originated at Yarralin\(^79\) and was now kept at Tchindi. Ceremonial spears specifically designed

\(^{78}\) I attended this ceremony in company with my colleague, Kevin Wanganeen.

\(^{79}\) Yarralin is a community situated about 300 kilometres south of Wadeye.
for this ceremony came from Maningrida in Western Arnhem Land and had been exchanged during funeral rites for a ‘bamboo’ (Boniface Perdjert 2005: pers. com).\(^8^0\)

It was explained that an important mythological ‘creator’ of this ceremony was \textit{Nugemanh}.\(^8^1\) Boniface, long associated with the Catholic Church outlined the various stages.\(^8^2\) They are \textit{Jaban}, the first ‘young man’ ceremony, \textit{Kardu Wati}, a second stage, and \textit{Kardu Ngeegh}, the third and final stage. Boniface, in explaining the stages, compared the ceremony to the three phases of the Catholic religious rites ‘baptism, reconciliation, and confirmation’ (Boniface Perdjert 2005: pers. com).

Leadership of the ceremony was strict and subject to affirmation and ratification from other leaders present. Aspects of the ceremony can be explained as follows. Boniface Perdjert was the overall coordinator. Patrick Nudjulu was in charge of general orders to the initiates, the choreography and mythical linkages. Les Kundjil and Phillip Mullumbuk (from the \textit{Wangga} ceremony group) were lead singers assisted by Laurence Kulumboort, Philip Jinjair, Richard Tcherna and Mathew Pultchen (\textit{Dhanba} group). Felix Bunduck was interpreter of proceedings for our benefit. Stephen Bunduck, a younger man, appeared to be the ‘apprentice’ song man. Brothers-in-law (or prospective brothers-in-law), of the respective initiates, referred to as \textit{malakumbara}, had organisational roles whilst taking into consideration the broader welfare of their charges. John Kingston Luckan was the person looking after and assisting in conjunction with a number of the \textit{malakumbara} or ‘lieutenants’. Such \textit{malakumbara} ‘brought in’ the

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\(^8^0\) A ‘bamboo’ is the term often used for a didgeridoo.
\(^8^1\) Referred to by Stanner (1966: 162) as \textit{Nogamain}. Street (2008) refers to it ‘as a superior spirit-being’.
\(^8^2\) Boniface Perdjert was ordained as a Catholic deacon in July 1974 by Bishop John O’Loughlin. He is the longest ordained deacon in Australia (see Sykes 2008).
'young men’ (initiates) at appropriate times for revelatory aspects of the ceremony and took them into the bush for toiletary purposes or to wait whilst dancers painted up (Bunduck 2005: pers. com).

Other people and groups had roles to play as primary dancers in performances that were revealed to the initiates, food and beverage that were brought into the ceremonial ground at regular intervals, and transport to and from the ceremony ground, referred to as ngurdarnu. There was a constant stream of men coming and going. Others such as Matthias Nemarluk and Tobias Nganbe took the role of brokering support and cooperation with the wider community, particularly with non-Aboriginal contacts working for the local council. Some men, aged thirty to forty, had roles in painting the forty-odd dancers who took part. Four relatively young men were principal dancers. They performed during the revelationary periods as highly skilled and proficient artists.

The ceremony was conducted with precision particularly with regard to timing. In the morning, there was a lot of preparation. At 1 pm the participants would take their positions, (my associate and I were told precisely where to sit) and the songs and stories would start. At 4 pm, special dances would be revealed to the initiates. At 5 pm all concerned, except the initiates, would ‘march in’ to the township of Wadeye. Whilst it did not occur at the ceremony that we were at, there were available sanctions for inappropriate behavior: a middle-aged man during a previous ceremony had been speared as a punishment for a misdemeanor. The
ceremony ground was cleaned regularly, the council truck picked up rubbish, and food was timely and plentiful.\(^{83}\)

At all times during the ceremony, the initiates were observed. Felix Bunduck pointed out that ‘we have to watch them – how big they’re going to be’ (Felix Bunduck 2005: pers. com). I believe he was referring to how the elders observed how the initiates acted during proceedings, their interest, fortitude, and potential in terms of how ‘big’ they were going to be in community life and possibly taking on leadership roles. These were long days. Many hours were spent sitting cross-legged observing the singers as they concentrated intently on the myths and journeys from Darwin to Port Keats and beyond.

At the end of each song, a younger ‘up-and-coming’ song man called out the sacred secret\(^{84}\) name for the Rainbow Serpent. Each young man’s ‘minder’, primarily his brother-in-law, kept the initiate’s mind on the job. By shaking them or rubbing their back, the malakumbara or brother-in-laws supported them as weariness set in. One young man was held from behind by the shoulders and moved back and forth to the singing. Every now and again one of the leaders would call out in Murrinh-patha. All of the initiates would sit up immediately, concentrate and resume clapping to the songs. Discipline was prominent as the stories reinforced life-principles and the Law.

\(^{83}\) The food during Punh is referred to as thirrmumuk.

\(^{84}\) Secret from women and the uninitiated.
The sacred objects were removed from their secret place and displayed. Boniface Perdjert explained that they are symbolically ‘Kardu Necki’ (our Mother). The objects are ‘maybe 20 years old’ and represented the sacred water lily. They were given to the Diminin by the Wudipuli clan. Kardi Win, he explained, is ‘this place here now’ and ‘the Wangga and Wurlthirri (ceremony groups) have their right to be here as well’. Little people, kardu wakal, had been seen the night before. Richard Tcherna reports that a little man went to the women’s camp and little women were seen at the men’s camp. A story was told of how the sacred yams were taken from the sacred site (spiritual home of the Diminin), Batuk, to Ardinitchi and the little people brought all the yams back. Felix Bunduck exclaimed, ‘This is Thamarrurr’. He explained that the ritual, at the end of each day, of putting mud on the women meant, ‘we are all one family’. The mud for this ritual came from a special place at ‘the old crossing called Air Force Creek’.

The initiates requested permission to go to the toilet. Their ‘supervisors’ led them off. Boniface Perdjert said, ‘Sometimes when we are here, we make fun’. Further, he said, ‘It is about respect and rules’. He explained that mothers and aunties were responsible for providing the food. Occasionally they asked Boniface (who had access to various resources) for ‘fifty dollars for food’. The women could not touch the food, cups or anything that went to the novices. Boniface said, ‘When they’re in the ceremony, they eat well. They get fat’. The food he said had to be handled by the respective brother-in-laws.

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85 The ‘little people’, in some situations, are considered noble spirits and a good sign nonetheless held with apprehension and considerable respect.
Many stories were told in between the ritual songs. Some were about *Karditch* (a word for the Devil). The old men laughed as they told about their ancestors’ belief that white men were ‘the Devil that came back from the grave’. Talk began about anthropologists and specifically Dr. Stanner. Felix Bunduck said, ‘He was a real Aboriginal man’. He said, ‘He had his own clap sticks and he could sing. He would go back to Canberra and then come back again. He wrote up all the information. He was real straight man. He lived in a tent at Yidiyi, the wild apple place’.

As mentioned, every initiate had a ‘minder’ or ‘partner’. In the old days, this partnership involved blood letting. The partner would cut himself and the initiate would drink some of the blood, smear it over his body, and not wash it off. This is not done today, but the minder is still responsible for encouraging and ‘looking after’ his protégé. The songs were varied. They were about country, animals, people and spirits. A song was sung about when the people caught a fish and describes how it was still alive and moving. One song was about *Kukpi*, the black nose striped carpetsnake or as Stanner (1966: 83; 125–136) referred to it as ‘The Snake Woman’. Stories were songs ‘from the Larrakiya, singing all the way, giving all the familiar names, all the way to the Fitzmaurice (River)’ (Felix Bunduck: pers. com).

A song was sung from the country of the *Kuy* clan, Patrick Nudjulu’s country. It was about *Angalmi*, the mullet fish. Songs were sung about *Tek* the red-tailed black cockatoo, key totem

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86 A story told to Stanner (MS 3752: Series 1: Item 157: 4) probably in the 1950s, was retold to me by senior men at the ceremony. Stanner was told that on encountering Europeans and their goods (about 1905–1910) an Aboriginal man ‘tried to eat raw tea leaves, thought tobacco was human excretement, and used flour to paint his body, and wondered how honey bag (jam) got inside the tin’.

87 The word ‘straight’ is often used in the Northern Territory (and probably beyond) to describe someone who is very honest.
of the *Diminin* clan. There was the *Yek Maninh* song about the flying fox and a song about the Ngarntimeli beach area where the notorious Nemarluk and others killed the Japanese. They called to old Walung, the warrior, and sang of his exploits in the dangerous McAdam Ranges. They sang of the sacred place, Walung, where *Kukpi* stopped on his journey. *Kukpi*, the snake who originated in an area within the Darwin Botanical Gardens. A song was sung about the two old women who went for a walk and then sat down for good and are today immortalised in the landscape. Tulmulu the painting site that records the epic travels was also mentioned.

Each song was interspersed with an oral story, usually told at great length, and always with a moral for those present. Les Kundjil pointed out the day before, that during the mud ritual with the women he was hit near his eye. If he had have been blinded it could have turned into a big fight. Patrick Nudjulu was particularly agitated and called every one closer, and stressed that today the men had to use common sense during the mud ritual. The singers particularly Les had been singing for four days straight, six hours at a time. Someone produced three bottles of cough mixture and the main singers drank it down as if it is water. Cough lozenges that I had in my pocket were handed around. Les, the lead singer, looked at one gingerly and then swallowed it whole. I put my notebook down to give the others and myself a ‘rest’. The old men seemed taken aback and wanted to know why I had stopped writing. Patrick Nudjulu said, ‘write this one down … this is a funny story’.

Patrick told the story of a ‘big fight’ between the Murrinh-patha and the Marritjevin. The Murrinh-patha were described as short men with powerful legs. The Marritjevin warriors were described as tall, lithe runners who could wade through the billabongs at speed. After the
Murrinh-patha escaped back toward their own country, a Marritjevin man dived into the billabong and caught a pelican. I am not sure what the exact moral of the story was but it brought laughter all round. Perhaps it was a celebration of the fact that you can be at war one day, then in ceremony and a spirit of coexistence and cooperation the next.

Patrick then went on to tell a story that took about an hour, and he and the others obviously thought that it was significant. It again brought great mirth particularly with Felix Bunduck who was laughing that much that he was struggling with the translation. It followed on from numerous tongue-in-cheek statements by senior men that my associate Kevin and I should paint up and march in at the end of the day to the mud ritual. Patrick said that ‘in my father’s day’ when the missionaries first arrived (1935), all of the participants would march in naked to present before all of the women. This created heated debate amongst the ceremony leaders. There was one faction led by a man from the Yederr clan who argued that this would offend the priests and brothers. The man said, ‘this is a big place. Now there are priests and brothers and you can’t go in naked.’ Nevertheless, an old man called Arkuk from Kuy clan (who was Patrick’s uncle) said he did not care and that he would go in naked anyway. This nearly resulted in a physical dispute but eventually the old man backed down and they covered up their private parts with loin clothes. From this day onward, the men always covered up their private parts. It was a momentous change that accommodated the new religious order, a new relationship, and a form of deference.

A further story was told about Arkuk who was a legendary big man and ‘six foot high’. Arkuk one day had asked Cumaiyi for help in a fight. Cumaiyi said, ‘No … you speared me in the
shoulder before when we had an argument and now I can’t throw the spear properly. Why do you now ask for help?’ More laughter ensued and the *kardu kirrmarn* sang what they described as a ‘fun song’ called *thiwidth* then the serious business of revelation continued.

At the end of each day, everyone except the initiates and their minders drove to an area about one kilometre from an open clearing where women and children of all ages waited. The men approached the ‘waiting ground’. They started marching in, painted very impressively and looking imposing. When they were fifty meters away from the women, they stopped, handed over their spears to a custodian for safe keeping, and then walked to an area where the ground was covered with tarpaulins and sat down. Food had been prepared for them and they sat eating it in small circles. Some faced the women who were teasing and intimidating them as they feasted. Food was taken and given to important old men who were sitting nearby. The feasting finished quickly. The men jumped to their feet and commenced singing, old song men leading the chants.
As the singing became more animated, the men produced bottles (mostly used Coke bottles) filled with clay; they then poured the clay on the women and children (following kin relationships). In some cases it was literally poured over their heads. The women were soon covered in mud from head to foot. This was a time of great hilarity, with much laughter from both sides. Most women took the treatment good heartedly and some hurled the mud back at
the men. Some of the men threw their comrades into the air (as if on a trampoline). Then, as the sun sank, suddenly it was all over for another day.

The ceremony progressed each day, and then reached a climax with an elaborate incorporation back into the main community. This final stage is represented in Figure 2F. Later during this stage the initiated men are offered more responsibility for people and things. It is at this point that they accept responsibility for their designated role as a more senior person and begin to pick up the mantle of leadership.
Figure 2G: Stage Four – Male Life Progression, Reincorporation and Accepting Responsibility

Note: The arrows indicate progression from one life-stage to another. A male adult enters this stage at about 17 and stays in it until his death.
Tobias Nganbe (2005: pers. com), Co-principal of Thamarrurr Catholic School at Wadeye points out that:

When you go through initiation ceremony together, you build up a special friendship, bond and obligation to the other young boys. You will always have something together that no one else can have. It doesn’t matter what clan or language you’re from, it doesn’t matter if you go down south for schooling … it will be there until the day you die. You can always have a good laugh with the men who went through with you … they will always be there for you.

Once one has been initiated, progression from this stage is reliant, to a large degree, on ceremonial attainment, physical changes, and the acquisition of valued attributes, such as the graying of hair. From the earliest age, existing clan leaders are ‘looking at them … looking at them’ [young boys] for the emergence of potential leaders (Bunduck 2004: pers. com). Some attributes that are ‘looked for’ is the ability to care for other people and country, to know key elements of ceremony, to be able to organise and mobilise others, and importantly the ability to fight.

**Leadership and Authority**

Stanner identified leadership and authority in the Port Keats area as being sanctioned by Law of a higher order. Such authority issued what Stanner (1966: 169) refers to as *murin daitpir,*
‘true words’ or the Truth. Such Law and associated rules of engagement were first taught to children at about the age of five. As youths grew older, they were further instructed by peer groups, mentoring and ritual on expected behaviour and about commitments to other individuals and the wider group. Stanner\textsuperscript{88} reasoned that:

In all social systems there are arrangements for social authority of various kinds … the system of authority … provides for the orderly discharge in a reasonably predictable way of the social roles, functions, duties and rights, of individuals and group in the social system … the system of sanctions, the body of customary law, the myths and traditions, and the ceremonial ritual supporting these systems are appropriate to each.

The \textit{kardu pule} were the decision-makers of each clan. Stanner (1966: 32; 35) translated \textit{pule} to mean old, senior of the clan, authoritative, friend, and in English, ‘boss’.\textsuperscript{89} Senior men symbolically received their signs of office and authority partially by totemism. Totems pointed ‘back’ to a ground and source which was self-authorised and self-authorising; and ‘on’ to powers and rights in various classes of functions for which the members of a group have their being. According to Stanner (1966: 35), ‘totemism is the language of the ontological system’.

\textsuperscript{88} Stanner MS 3752: Series 1: Item: 113:1 – ‘Lecture: Local Authority Systems and Political Factors in the Modern Period’.

\textsuperscript{89} Included in this category are \textit{pulen pulen} (the eldest men) and \textit{kardu ngalandar} (the preceding category of older men).
There were no formal chiefs or men who, like the Melanesian schemata, became leaders through accumulated wealth. However there were leaders by virtue of ‘unusual skill, initiative, and force’ (Stanner 1979: 39). Power was distributed amongst men rather than women and the older one was; the more power they held. Power, authority, influence, age status, knowledge are intermeshed. The old men with secret knowledge and authority sometimes withheld it or released it sporadically through ceremony and hence manipulated power over the younger men.

Stanner recognised the presence of men referred to as *kirman*, today spelt *kirrmarn*, amongst the clans. The word, during his observations in the 1950s, came from a language further south of Port Keats, possibly Djaminjung. Stanner interpreted *kirman* as meaning a ‘thinking man’, a ‘man for finding out’ and a ‘clever man’. He was a person associated with songs and sickness.

However, Stanner (1979: 39) did not observe absolute domination of one man over another. Socially there were foundational principles of egalitarianism and reciprocity, a notion of making things ‘level’, and subsequently maintaining a homoeostasis condition (Stanner 1979: 39–40). He also saw a society where there was a ‘juridical system’ that was both elementary and defective, for often individual insistence on personal retaliation came to the fore (Stanner 1966: 58). If conflict and violence came to the fore, it was often caused by ‘sex-inequality and age-inequality’ (Stanner 1979: 40).

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90 Stanner MS 3752: Series 3: Item 12.
Stanner described an intricate and complex social system in his observations from 1935 onwards. In 1958, he argued that whilst there was still, at that time, a ‘fundamentally Aboriginal’ system, many things were changing. People had left country, no one knew their moiety group, there were many breaches in the ‘traditional’ trading system, and the corporate clan structure was ‘only a memory’ (Stanner 1979: 62). Given this view of a society at odds with itself, if not disintegrating, it is interesting to reflect on what I was able to observe during the period 2002–2006.

**The Model of Male Leadership Development at Port Keats**

The information collected so far lends itself to a conceptual model of male development at Port Keats. The following model of Indigenous leadership at Port Keats (Figure 2H), that I have developed, depicts a human activity system; with a set of activities connected together. Each of these stages has been articulated in Figures 2D, 2E, 2F, and 2G. Each key activity is a stage that is interconnected as follows.

**Stage One – ‘Look after’ (Figure 2C)**

This chapter presented evidence collected from 1935 onwards that describe how male individuals are nurtured from an early age and eventually transformed into leaders. Key facilitators of this early nurturing process, then and today, are the individual, family and clan group. Markers of transition include age as well as physical and psychosocial development.
Stage Two – ‘Grow up’ (Figure 2D)

At an early stage of life (5–6 years), the young begin to learn about relationships with their immediate family, extended family and other members of their clan. In addition, they begin to learn basic aspects of survival. They are taught rudimentary knowledge about their clan group and its territory. This elementary knowledge development paves the way for the next critical stage of leadership learning and transition.

Stage Three – ‘Make a man’ (Figure 2E)

Stage Three is vital to becoming considered an adult male and progression towards becoming a leader. It involves transitional rites of passage toward adulthood. Stanner observed what he referred to as temporary conversion to a conceptual state of exclusion, or ‘wild dog’ status. 91 This transformation is consistent with Van Gennep’s theory of *rites de passage* (1910), and is considered crucial for individual progression towards acceptance as a responsible adult.

During this phase, senior men control the initiate while he is taught, through various mediums, about societal mores and traditional law. He is ‘removed’ from the mainstream community whilst such education and training occurs. 92 Strict discipline is enforced and oversighted by senior men. It is also a time of ‘revelation’ where sacred objects and knowledge is shown to the initiates. Stories about people (human beings and mythological beings) and country are

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92 During this period of induction, during which ceremonial and religious transition of knowledge transpires, the initiates live in a designated ‘men’s ceremony camp’. Senior and initiated men move to and from the main community, however the initiates are kept in seclusion until the appropriate time for their return to the community.
told and explained. This stage is essentially a period of conceptual revelation celebrated with dance and ceremony culminating in a major ceremony when the initiates return to the main community.

**Stage Four – ‘Being offered and accepting responsibility’ (Figure 2F)**

An individual progresses to the next stage of full adulthood once they ‘return’ to mainstream society following initiation. Firstly by being offered, and then accepting responsibility for people and things. They may, after a few years, be referred to as *kardu pule* (senior man) of their clan. By taking care of people, property and activities, and showing leadership they are also linking (and going full cycle) back to Stage One and the responsibility to ‘look after’ the transition and induction of others.

The development cycle described above can now be represented as a holistic model of leadership development as follows.
Figure 2H: A Model of Male Leadership Development in the Port Keats Region
‘Taking on’ responsibility

Leaders in the Port Keats region acquire status and authority in a unique way. It is founded on the principle alluded to in Figure 2F, of the ‘taking on’ of responsibility. ‘Responsibility’ in the English language means to be morally accountable for one’s actions. Murrinh-patha people translate the term as – *ngay ngambamut nu ngarra mangi nhimi* – meaning ‘I will give it to you to hold’. However, it also involves a second action, that of accepting the responsibility. This is expressed as – *ngay warda mayit nu* – meaning ‘I will now hold it’. There is reciprocity involved. There is not just an ‘offer’ but also an acceptance of the responsibility.

‘Control’ in English means to have the power of direction or command. The Murrinh-patha language interprets ‘control’ as – *ngay ka kardu lurruth ngala ngurran* – meaning ‘I am a person constantly going strong and hard’ or ‘I am trying very hard’. The notion in Murrinh-patha is not so much that you are directing other people but you are working for them. Therefore, responsibility to the Murrinh-patha means to hold or look after something or someone. Control means to work hard for something, for people or on someone’s behalf.93

‘Looking after’ and ‘Looking back’

The concept of ‘looking after’ as articulated by Myers (1976) is certainly applicable to life in the Port Keats region. From an early age a child’s development is overseen firstly by their parents and grandparents and then increasingly by uncles and aunts. Others observe a boy’s behavior, demeanor, and decisions are made as to when they will commence the formalised

93 I am grateful to the late Gordon Chula and Dominic McCormack for their Murrinh-patha language and conceptual skills in assisting with the exploration and articulation of these concepts.
rites of passage. If there appear to be irresponsible actions on the part of the boys then sometimes they are introduced to some of the ceremonial aspects at an earlier age than normal. During all of this early development, they are acquiring motor skills and knowledge from either their elders or peer group. Such skills and knowledge today may be directed in a responsible direction or, in some cases, in a dysfunctional manner. Nevertheless, the youth is observed and leadership qualities are noted and nurtured.

The Port Keats people also often refer to a concept of ‘looking back’. Felix Bunduck, for example, was explaining how Boniface Perdjert is regarded as the primary leader and spokesperson for the Kardu Diminin clan. However, on occasions, Boniface will ‘look back’, for reference and endorsement, to other senior men. It may also be a form of deferment for particular matters. Felix (2005: pers. com) said:

‘He looks back to me too … any big business … they all look back to me. Other bosses too …like Gregory and Laurence. They look back to important people like that. Gregory is a big boss too’.

**Pulen Ngala – ‘Great Man’**

Laurence Kulumboort, Felix Bunduck and Leo Melpi (2005: pers. com) explained to me how, in some instances, a leader may be regarded as a *pulen ngala*, ‘great man’. They used the following men as examples.

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94 ‘Dysfunctional’ in the sense that youth may initiate violence or destructive property damage toward others, particularly other youth and their families.
Table 2B: ‘Great Man’ Status

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of Leader</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Walung         | ‘a business man and sorcerer’  
                ‘top business man’  
                ‘a great man … very strong, like Johnny Chula’ |
| Durmagan       | ‘a real business man’  
                ‘a strong man’  
                ‘a proper fighting man’  
                ‘a fair man … he might give you a hand’ |
| Tjimari [Djinu] – also known as Wagin or Wagon | ‘the big boss’  
‘proper business man … nobody ever muck about him’  
‘a good fighting man’ |

(Note: Information provided by Laurence Kulumboort, Felix Bunduck and Leo Melpi 2005)

Further, they explained that a pulen ngala, would ‘give a good example’ (provide a good example of leadership). Felix Bunduck said that he ‘got a good example’ from a man called Kurawul. Kurawul was ‘A real man. Not showing off. Proper business. No mucking about’. Laurence, Felix and Leo all agreed that ‘we can’t talk to men like this … until they look back’. They also said that there can be a mutjinga ngala – ‘great woman’.

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95 The late Johnny Chula was a significant leader who participated in many fields of life. He was awarded the Civilian Service Medal 1939-1945 for rescuing an Australian World War II pilot near Wadeye after his plane burst into flames and crashed. He also served in the Australian Army Aboriginal Labour Unit.
The Nurturing of Leaders

Knowledge of one’s clan country is important and hence to ‘go back to country’ is definitely seen as a positive part of the nurturing process. Some of the clan groups live, or have the ability to live or stay on, their estate for some period. During this time stories relating to the country are taught, hunting and gathering skills are acquired, and responsibility to other members of the clan are instilled. For some groups there is not the ability, opportunity, or in some cases the inclination to reside on country. Felix Bunduck (2005: pers. com) relates how his father, Nym Bunduck, nurtured him:

That old man would say, “Don’t go silly. Don’t go anywhere wrong. Don’t leave that person alone. Go visit him”. He was telling me the good things like, “Get a spear. Go to the saltwater”. And I did it. Nobody feeding me. I went myself. It’s through actions … like hunting. He was a real man.

At the appropriate time, a person develops and then begins to acquire leadership responsibilities to his extended family and his clan. Such acquisition relates to several factors including age, demeanor and knowledge. Responsibilities relate to people in the clan and to the relevant estate and over time to people and structures beyond the clan. Since the arrival of the mission in the 1930s, there have been opportunities to engage and operate as a leader in the

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96 This is often due to the remoteness of the particular estate. Those with clan estates in close proximity to Wadeye, might live in or visit the country on a regular basis. Others who have estates in remote parts of the region find it much more difficult; although some of these groups have established outstations and reside there on a fairly continuous basis.
intercultural domain as well, and such opportunity and pressure increases to operate in this domain. Felix Bunduck (2005: pers. com) explained how the mission influenced his life at an early age:

As a young boy, I used to do jobs at the Presbytery like cleaning shoes. My first reading was a dictionary. The first word I learnt was “humbug”. Father Docherty asked me what the word humbug was … and I told him. He then went and bought me my first book and every afternoon I went to the Presbytery, sat down, and read to him. Good one, eh?

Young people are therefore ‘grown up’ in the Thamarrurr region through a nurturing process and designated ‘rites of passage’. It is evident that the status acquired through this process is commensurate with responsibilities. How a person respects these responsibilities influences the role they may play later in life. Some men become ceremony men, but only after they have shown others their superior understanding of the Law, their respect for it, and demonstrated knowledge of what is fair and what is not. Progression through the stages or rites is based on various factors, including, ‘understanding the Law’, trust, ‘how people behave’, the ability to ‘see right from wrong’, honesty, how a person conducts themselves, ceremony, and age. Leadership, control and responsibility as seen through the eyes of the Thamarrurr people are based on these cultural constructs (Ivory 2005a).
As mentioned, individuals of Port Keats pass through designated rites of passage and the status acquired through this process is equaled by responsibilities. The stages (in Murrinh-patha terms), *kardu wakul, kardu mamai, kardu lamatingu, kardu tjambitj, kardu kigai, kardu kake, kardu pule, kardu ngalander and kardu pulen pulen* are markers of passage through life-stages, but personal qualities can also come to the fore. Those in the category of *kardu kirrmarn* ‘hold the Law, and run the Law’ (Jabinee 2005: pers. com). 97 On one occasion, when we were discussing leadership qualities, an elderly man from the highest level joined the discussion. Two other senior men of slightly lower rankings (Laurence Kulumboort and Felix Bunduck) then spoke of this man as an example of a person possessed of great leadership qualities. They described the old man, Les Kundjil, as ‘a very good man. He knows the Law. He is very honest. He cares about other people and looks after them’ (Kulumboort and Bunduck 2005: pers. com).

In a broad sense, there are three basic layers of leadership. The structure of leadership in the region emanates from descent to country, kinship and personal rights and traits. Certain individuals, predominantly men, but not all, may progress in prowess to a higher level based on ceremonial knowledge and other factors.

Strong leadership during pre-mission and early mission times were essential for clan survival and identity. Stanner records that groups, when he arrived in 1935, were in a constant state of vigilance and warfare. Old people today still talk about raids from other groups as far away as Pine Creek, mainly to steal women or to seek payback. They also tell of how clans with strong

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97 Senior song and ceremony men.
leadership would sometimes dispossess another group of their estate. Leadership in pre-contact times, according to current leaders, was founded not only on wisdom, ceremonial and age factors, but on ability as warriors, fighters and defenders of their people. Some males are identified early in life for particular leadership roles. For instance, one man said that his father who was the leader of a clan told him when he was very young that he would be a leader, even though at the time he had older brothers. His father also said that he had to go away to college, which he did, interstate, for some years.

Indigenous leadership at Port Keats at the highest level can be likened to the notion of ‘executive directors’ ensuring that the ‘ship stays on course’. Nelson Mandela (1994: 20–21) defined his favoured style of leadership as leading ‘like a shepherd’ from behind and ensuring ‘consensus’. This is the forte of the Port Keats leaders and one of the leaders’ most valuable attributes. Even the most heated meetings generally resolve in a consensus. The consensus may not be final, but it certainly appears to confer respect to the people whose land they are on. People have complex relationships and often when there are many leaders present with diverse interests, the majority are cautious and wary of the danger of continued divergence and antagonism.
Another way that men may have gained power and leadership attributes since the 1930s, is when someone had ‘gone away’ for work and experienced other places and people. A person would go away in the early days to work as a stockman, a crocodile shooter, or on the railway

Figure 2I: Returning from Punh Ceremony (2005)

Initiated men, including kardu pule and kardu ngalander, clan leaders, returning to Wadeye community following a day of ceremony (photo taken by Ivory).
or in the armed services. A case was referred to me by Aloyisius Narjic of how a man in his thirties, and no doubt being groomed for a leadership role, had ‘gone away’ to Queensland to work temporarily as a plumber. He later returned, his reputation further enhanced, and undertook a leadership role in his clan, in ceremonial activities, and in more mainstream affairs. However, examples of such experiences are rare today because of a lack of opportunity to expand their horizons. This phenomenon may be linked to warriors (such as the immortal Nemarluk) who previously would travel long distances, on foot, to engage with other groups or participate in ceremonies. When they returned, they substantially increased in reputation because of the broadening of their networks, knowledge and skills.

Unfortunately, for some of the younger generation ‘going away’ today may mean a term of imprisonment and this presents challenges for the Thamarrurr system of governance. Senior men and women are keen to explore ways for these younger generations to re-engage.

**Summary and Conclusion**

I have detailed in this chapter how the people of the Thamarrurr region, prior to colonisation, lived on country that was rich in food and resources and in religious significance. The land supported a relatively high density of population, compared to other parts of Australia, and the society was structured with the primary division being the clan. Each clan had fairly strictly defined territory, delineated by physical markers and mythological sites of being, that were known by both men and women.
The country was zealously presided over by members of the clan, even from afar, and there were regular warfare-related disputes. Social life, according to Stanner (1966: 31) was a ‘volitional and purposive system deferring to traditional data and givens’ and it was ‘tradition-directed’. Stanner (1966: 37) also argued that whilst ‘certain aspects’ of the culture were ‘working toward’ a ‘unified system or unified whole’, he could not develop a theory that assumed the society in general was a ‘unified whole’. However, I argue that whilst Stanner could not subscribe to such a hypothesis, the evidence then, and now, still points toward a networked and linked system of governance based on deference. This system, with many commonly held principles and norms, also favours certain styles and qualities of leadership.

Today, the clan is still a key structure of importance, clan members and outsiders are still very knowledgeable about their estates and fulfill to varying degrees, responsibilities to such country. In the past, a group may have been pushed off country by the might of the spear or a more amicable arrangement reached. This is unlikely today as land rights, enshrined in Australian law, has brought a new definition and permanence to land ownership.

The rights of the individual are still paramount today as is the right to contest issues, avenge grievances and go to ‘war’, if one is gravely aggrieved. Where Stanner described ‘hordes’, ‘gangs’ and ‘fireplaces’, now there are council houses, albeit grossly overcrowded in suburban-type enclaves, but still within demarcated cultural places. Moiety division is not as prominent, at least at Wadeye, but people paint their bodies for ceremony and perform secret and public rites and rituals within moiety principles.
Alliances are constantly worked on and nurtured (particularly through marriage), cultural trade is developed, and respective affiliations cultivated. Individual rights are valued but still within the schemata of a group context. Today, some aspects of the rituals and rites have changed, but the key foundations essentially remain the same. It is about young people becoming adults; gradually progressing to a new way with associated rules, principles and morals. It is also about not being alone, for there will always be countrymen and family to ‘look after’ you.

I have demonstrated that despite the influence of outside contact, many of the structures and aspects of culture remain similar to when the missionaries first arrived. Family, kinship, cultural alliances, land ownership and knowledge-based systems remain as key societal foundations. Ceremonies are performed within the constraints of contemporary conditions and the reconfiguration of song genres, from the 1950s onwards as described, demonstrates a desire to reproduce indigenous values within a paradigm of modernity. Individuals are nurtured within a cultural context but amidst the environment of a burgeoning town with all of its constraints, time factors and peculiarities. Nevertheless, leaders are identified, trained, and then thrust on to a stage that increasingly operates in the intercultural with various political, social, environmental and economic responsibilities.

This chapter has explored Aboriginal society and leadership in the years leading up to the 1930s. It also examined how the society is structured and operates today. Some things have changed but generally, many things remain constant. This raises the question why there has been some change, but in other areas, continuity. I theorise that changes, accommodation, and reconstitution occurred in response to massive challenges on both physical and psychological
fronts of human endeavour. It was only the resilience of the people and the leadership that enabled them to re-engage on another front and continue their lives.

The next chapter will examine this proposition and report on the dynamics of these challenges and subsequent responses. To understand the dynamics of what is happening today, we need to examine the foundations of where the society has evolved from, its past leadership, and why certain decisions were made. Importantly to the theme of this dissertation, this discussion will challenge the supposition that Indigenous leadership was ill-defined and unresponsive.
Chapter Three

Indigenous Leadership Challenged: Local Leadership Responses (1870-1935) in the Port Keats Region to an Encroaching Colonial Frontier

The previous chapter examined key elements of Aboriginal society in the Port Keats area from the time of first contact to the present. In particular it has described how males progressed through life, becoming senior men, and leaders in the region. Current cultural constructs, systems and practices were then described using ethnographic material and compared to the previous observations of other researchers. There have obviously been some changes in how the society operates; whilst in other areas things remain much the same.

The purpose of this chapter is to examine some of the most influential impacts on the society since first contact, and how Aboriginal leadership reacted to these outside influences whilst attempting to sustain their autonomy. Transformation and continuity, particularly to leadership, can be identified and analysed in the context of a changed social environment.

Indigenous people in Australia have had to adapt to changes in their physical and social environments since they first arrived on the continent. Since colonisation, the frontier has engulfed places and people that were previously remote and culturally distinct. The frontier
began to indirectly affect the lives of inhabitants of the Port Keats area from circa 1870. Some of the impacts included epidemics and resultant population decline, the intrusions of pastoralism and mining, the arrival of a new system of law and the police who enforced it, ‘white-fella’ wars and evangelism. This chapter examines how these effects impacted on the Port Keats people and how the Aboriginal leadership and their followers acted in response. The chapter will examine the events prior to the arrival of the mission in 1935.

Society has myths, legends and heroes. It is part of the folklore that underpins behaviour, mores and sanctions and in some ways defines a leadership prototype in the region. In order to understand how leadership has developed in the Thamarrurr region, we need to examine the first contact periods, the leaders and types of leadership that existed then, and what evolved post-contact. It will be argued that although ‘leadership’ and what makes it may have changed somewhat to outsiders, in fact when closely analysed, it has its foundation in legends and leaders of the past.

In Chapter Two I described the mosaic of relationships, structures and alliances that is the society in the Port Keats region today. I explained how these networks are founded on traditions steeped in ritual and ceremony. This chapter will now analyse how these networks come to life and respond to change, threats or innovation. The chapter is about individuals and groups of people and how they operate and interact and, importantly, how they focus their energies. It will give some insight into what the people hold to be important in their lives. It is also about how leadership is aroused and motivated and why and how others follow.
Leadership Responses to the Other: The New Frontier

It is possible, by analysing Northern Territory history, to reconstruct first contact events amongst Europeans and Aboriginal people of the Port Keats region. They are important for they set the scene, particularly with regard to Indigenous leadership, for the events that followed.

Seafarers almost certainly visited the region from South East Asia including those from Makassar, Malaya, and Indonesia. Historians are unsure of exactly when visitations were made, however the first journeys from Ujungpandang (Makassar) appears to have began about 1720 (MacKnight 1972, 1976). The Aborigines received metal axes and other goods in return for items such as tortoise shell, pearl-shell, pearl, and sandalwood (Baker 1984: 7).

The Macassans were primarily after trepang (sea cucumber) but also engaged in other fishing and other collection type activities (such as turtle shell, shark fin and buffalo horns). They maintained a working relationship with many Indigenous groups along the northern coastline although, on occasions, there were violent incidents. The relationship was akin to a partnership because mutual trade of goods prevailed. Goods sought after by Aboriginal people included iron, knives, cloth, tobacco, matches, rice, corn, arak (an Indonesian alcoholic beverage) and other items (Lami Lami 1974: 71–73).

The Macassan sailors also sought and were offered relationships with Aboriginal women in a reciprocal arrangement. Occasionally Aboriginal men travelled back and forth to Macassar and reports are that some had wives there, children, and eventually lived and died there. Some
had dual families, that is, a Macassan family and Australian family (Ganambarr 2005: pers. com). Not only new words were incorporated into the Aboriginal world. New concepts and social relationships were introduced that either outmoded or strengthened existing ones. Interestingly from the perspective of this study about leadership, Macassan words for leaders became known and were used by the Aboriginal groups.\textsuperscript{98}

In the Port Keats region, there are in fact limited stories and legends about contact with Indonesian visitors. However, the 2005 landing of a small fishing boat and its occupants from Kupang, Indonesia who had drifted in distress because their engine had failed brings to mind the susceptibility of this coastline to Indonesian visitations intentional or not. There is no doubt that there would have been visitations and contact of sorts. The south-westerly wind that blows at certain times of the year in northern Australia supports the notion of easy access. The coastline near Port Keats has numerous tamarind thickets (Tamarind fruit was carried by Macassans to prevent scurvy and for cooking). Aboriginal people from the area were continually traveling to areas around Darwin and beyond for ceremonies and other events and they were part of a broad trade network that moved Macassan goods through the continent. The Port Keats people had regular contact with the Larrakia of Darwin who in turn intermarried, traded, and performed ceremonies with Aboriginal groups to the east. In the Kimberley region, there is evidence of regular visits from Indonesian and Malaysian vessels, so boats were travelling from these areas to the Australian coastline, north and south of Port Keats regularly. Hence, throughout much of the northern Australia, there was a healthy trade

\textsuperscript{98} For instance, the person in charge of a Macassan boat is known throughout Arnhem Land as a \textit{bunggawa}. The \textit{bunggawa’s} ‘boss’, that is the person in charge of the fleet of ships is known as the \textit{rimba} (Lami Lami 1974: 72). Today the term \textit{bunggawa} is generally used throughout Arnhem Land for any type of ‘boss’ in both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal contexts (including town clerks, store managers etc.).
and economic process that had developed over hundreds of years and was linked, through Macassan trade, as far afield as China.

From circa 1880 onwards, Japanese boats also ventured into the area. The Japanese and others were often travelling between Darwin and Broome searching for pearls. The Port Keats region was a ‘stop off’ point as they fished, caught shark fin, and exchanged tobacco, knives and axes, alcohol and other goods for women. On occasions, they would pick up women at one point and then drop them off further along the coast. Stanner commented, ‘For centuries Malays and in the last 50 years Japanese have been visiting for pearls, trochus and trepang’. 99 Further Stanner wrote that ‘Port Keats seems to have been one of their oldest ports of call … because good water and firewood … and the harbor is snug and safe for the small proas in the big “blow”’. 100

Interestingly the number of stories are few, at least in the Port Keats area, and possibly contact in the Top End of Australia, during the past few hundred years, may have been more centered on the rich trepang fields of north-eastern Arnhem Land. 101 However, prevailing winds at certain times of the year favored a quick and direct passage to the Port Keats region. 102

99 Stanner MS3752: Series 1: Item 82: 3.
100 ibid.
101 Trepang, beche-de-mer, or sea cucumber is a sea creature highly prized in South East Asia and China as an aphrodisiac.
102 This was evidenced by the arrival, in 2005, of a group of fishermen from the Indonesian island of Roti who were swept down to Docherty Island when their motorised boat broke down.
First Contacts – Explorers

Other visitors did traverse the coastline, and further inland, and in doing so gave contemporary names to prominent parts of the country. Early explorers of the Australian coast who travelled the coastline past Port Keats included Tasman (1644) and Baudin (1801–03).

Phillip Parker King (1819)

Lieutenant Phillip Parker King on the *HMS Mermaid* explored the Port Keats region in 1819. Anchoring offshore near the mouth of Port Keats, the explorers ventured in a whaleboat to examine the inlet. They followed the western arm ‘for ten miles’ and eventually slept for the night (Hordern 1997: 195). The sailors could hear the ‘roar of the ocean rolling across Joseph Bonaparte gulf and breaking on Munda and Injun beaches, four miles away’ (Hordern 1997: 195). Traversing country ‘that had recently been burnt by Aborigines’ they stopped ‘a mile or two’ from wooded hills ‘about three hundred feet high’ (Hordern 1997: 195). They named the inlet ‘Port Keats’ after their patron, Vice-Admiral Sir Richard Goodwin Keats, and the highest hill in sight Mount Goodwin (Hordern 1997: 195). Although King did not make personal contact with Aboriginal people, he found physical evidence such as a footprint and distant fires (King 1969: 277).

Wickham and Stokes (1839)

The last major sea exploration of the Australian coast was performed in the surveying ship, the *HMS Beagle*, between 1837 and 1843. It is significant for the people of Port Keats because, whilst they may have had contact with seafarers such as Indonesian fishermen, it was probably
the first occasion that contact of sorts had been made with Europeans. On 9 October 1839, the captain of the *Beagle*, J.C. Wickham, and John Lort Stokes and crew, explored various areas around Port Keats.\(^{103}\) Noticing fires that had been lit by Aboriginal people, Stokes (1846: 46) hoped that ‘colonization’ would extend into the area and one day ‘smoke may rise from Christian hearths where now alone the prowling heathen lights his fire’.

Wickham and Stokes’s visit is particularly important in defining leadership of the day. The events are interesting not so much for the fact that there was conflict, but in reflecting on how the Aboriginal groups organised themselves and responded in a militaristic sense. Certainly, the contact appears to have become part of oral history and for the people of Port Keats, demonstrating the classic response at the time to any threat. The scenario I will describe has been reconstructed from various oral and written accounts including Aboriginal people.

One of the first actions taken by Captain Wickham as the *HMS Beagle* anchored near Point Pearce was to have four of the crew flogged (Hordern 1989: 199-200). There is little doubt that the sound of the cat-o’-nine-tails ripping the backs of these men was heard onshore, at what today is known as the small community of, Kurdarntiga. The *Beagle* had anchored late in the afternoon of 5 December 1839. Men, women and children from the *Yek Nangu* clan, Murrinh-patha language, had watched with trepidation as the ship sailed into the middle of their country and stopped. Smoke messages from their immediate southern neighbors, the *Yek*... 

\(^{103}\) They named prominent sites of the area such as Fossil Head, Table Hill and south including the Fitzmaurice River, Keyling Inlet, Quoin and Clump Islands, and the Macadam Range.
Ngudanimarn clan, warning of the approach of the ship, no doubt had alarmed the Nangu. The ship was possibly the biggest they had seen and was a major threat.

The Nangu decision-makers went into full warfare mode. Other families of the Nangu clan gathered. Runners, with message sticks, were immediately dispatched to warn and engage fellow members of the Murrinh-patha alliance, namely the Yek Maninh, Yek Diminin, and Yek Ngudanimarn clans. The runners travelled through the night and by early morning warriors with spears and other armory gathered. The warriors moved toward a central point on the coast. Women and children moved to inland shelters for when conflict broke out.

That afternoon, a dinghy was lowered and several parties came ashore. Men from the ship began shooting at birds and generally ‘all over the ground’ (Stokes 1846: 107). The Nangu leaders watched with growing anger. The men from the Beagle were walking dangerously close to a sunset ceremony site and had already walked through an ancient rock fish-trapping site (Narndu 2004: pers. com). Then the men went back to the Beagle and the Nangu breathed easier. Nevertheless the kardu pule and ngalander (senior leaders) conferred and agreed that if the intruders came again they would act. The strategic position to attack was from on top of the cliff.

John Lort Stokes, who had already been ashore, then decided to take further chronometer readings in the mid-afternoon. He had been informed that the others ‘had seen no traces of the

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104 Other explorers may have passed the coast, but few would have anchored so close to the mainland and come ashore.
105 Stokes (1846: 107) refers to one particular bird as a ‘very beautiful bird’, the Amadina Gouldiae, or Gouldian finch.
natives’ (Stokes 1846: 107). The tide had gone out and as he came ashore, the dinghy grounded on the reef. They had to walk about 300 meters toward the beach. Stokes left his pistol in the boat. He walked towards the cliff with Tarrant and a seaman lagging behind. The Murrinh-patha decided that in order to drive the intruders’ away, attack was the best defence.

Stokes turned to tell the crew to move along, but as he called out, he was speared. He wrote:

I had just turned my head round to look after my followers when I was suddenly staggered by a violent and piercing blow about the left shoulder: and ere the dart has ceased to quiver in its destined mark, a loud long yell, such as the savage only can produce …

(Stokes 1846: 108)

The cliff ‘swarmed with Aborigines, leaping and yelling’ (Hordern 1989: 200). Stokes turned, grabbed the long fighting spear (with no barbs), and tore it out of his shoulder. He frantically began to run back towards the boat. Stokes (1846: 108) recalled that ‘One tall bushy-headed fellow led the group’. Tarrant and the seaman ran toward him as Murrinh-patha tribesmen leapt down the cliff. Stokes fell twice, but got up again. The Murrinh-patha ‘were hurrying along in a long file, shouting and waving their clubs’ (Stokes 1846: 110).

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106 A painting completed in 1863 by Richard. B. Beechley of the spearing is held in the Nan Kivell Collection, National Library of Australia.
The others, either thinking he was all right or perhaps feared for their own lives, turned and ran for the boat. Those on the Beagle were watching the drama unfold. Emery launched the cutter whilst at the same time gesturing to Tarrant and the seaman to assist Stokes. They ran back and half dragged him toward the boat. The Murrinh-patha closed in, brandishing clubs. Stokes and the other two turned in order to face their attackers. Emery began to fire his musket; the warriors stopped and then hastily retreated, their mission accomplished. Stokes was rowed back to the Beagle (Hordern 1989: 202). His blood soaked jacket and shirt were removed. Bynoe inserted a silver probe and ‘air bubbled out’ (Hordern 1989: 202). His lung had been pieced and as the night wore on, he ‘went into violent spasms’ (Hordern 1989: 202). However, by early morning, the worst was over and Stokes the next day was lucky to ‘once more see the first rays of the sun’ (Stokes 1846: 111).

Onshore, the Murrinh-patha tribal clans celebrated their victory but still cautiously watched the lanterns burning on the ship, prepared for a counter assault. The next day, Captain Wickham went back onshore to finish rating the chronometers. This time they were accompanied by four armed men to patrol the cliff whilst a further two patrolled below. Emery, Fitzmaurice and Helpman took a ‘party of seamen and marines ashore with orders to shoot at any black on sight’ (Hordern 1989: 203). They scoured the country without success, as the Murrinh-patha would have observed them from hidden vantage points waiting for a mistake that would once again make the intruders vulnerable. Four days later, on 12 December 1839, with provisions running low, Wickham decided to set sail for the Swan River. He named

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107 Stokes’s blood-stained jacket today is held at the Maritime Museum in London.
the bay, Treachery Bay. The clans watched the ship drift away. Once again, the political alliance of local Indigenous leaders had stood firm.

Forces from two very different cultures had met for the first time on a rocky beach in remote and virtually unexplored Northern Australia. One group was no doubt thankful they had survived, for ‘the hand of the savage almost grasped our throats’ (Stokes 1846: 110). The other group, well drilled with a sound strategy, had successfully defended their territory from outside intruders.\(^{108}\)

**Augustus Gregory (1855)**

One of Australia’s greatest explorers, Augustus Charles Gregory (1819–1905), accepted an invitation in December 1854 from the British government to lead a scientific exploration known as the North Australian Expedition 1855–56. The purpose of the expedition was to investigate the question of ‘an inland sea’ and to ‘obtain as extensive a knowledge as possible’ of the north-west interior of the continent (Cumpston 1972: 17). The Colonial Office was no doubt keen to examine the possibility and benefits of settlement in the area. Instructions to Gregory (Cumpston 1972: 17) also included the warning:

\(^{108}\) I was taken to this site by immediate descendants of the *Yek Nangu* clan who told their version of the incident and showed me related items to the story including the dreaming site, fish trap and an engraving on the rock face by one of the explorers. They tell the story, handed down for over 160 years, with pride. The group, though relatively small in number today, have a very high community profile.
… you will meet numerous and perhaps powerful and warlike tribes of natives in the tropical regions through which you will pass, I am directed by the Duke of Newcastle to express his earnest hope that you will use every means in your power to preserve a friendly intercourse with them …

The expeditionary party, consisting of eighteen men, left Brisbane on 12 August 1855 in the support schooner Tom Tough and the supply barque Monarch. On board were two hundred sheep and fifty horses. Gregory (McLaren 1996: 175–177) was an extremely knowledgeable horseman and meticulous planner from all reports. He was also well armed with 25,000 rounds of ammunition as well as 17 shotguns, 4 rifles, and 10 revolving pistols (McLaren 1996: 175).

The horses were swum ashore near the notorious Treachery Bay (about 25 kilometers southwest of Wadeye) on 18 September 1855 and the sheep and supplies were transferred to the Monarch. The Monarch left for Singapore, and the Tom Tough for the Victoria River. The place of arrival, known by Aboriginal people as Nantuk, was on country owned by the Yek Nangu clan, the same Murrinh-patha clan who had attacked and speared Stokes in 1839.

Gregory, accompanied by his brother Henry Gregory (Assistant Commander), Mueller (botanist), and six other men then headed south toward the Macadam Range. They would have had to travel through the territory of the Yek Ngudanimarn, Rak Nuthunthu, and Yek Wunh
clan countries (although different clans may have held the country in 1855). After several reconnaissance trips they moved the complete party from the camp on 1 October 1855. The group had therefore camped in the Providence Hill area for almost two weeks without encountering local people. No doubt they were being closely watched and possibly the sheer size of the group may have prevented an attack.

Gregory and his party saw ‘four natives’ on 5 October 1855 (possibly in the Madjellindi Valley) and the following day ‘a native man and two women’. Surviving an attack by crocodiles in the Fitzmaurice River, they lost several horses and travelled over some of the roughest and most isolated country in Australia. They eventually met with the rest of the expedition at the Victoria River. Gregory must have been one of the luckiest explorers of all time. That they were not attacked by the Murrinh-patha is almost unbelievable. The explanation may lie in a probable dramatic decrease in population primarily due to epidemics that will be explored in another section of this dissertation.

It should be noted that as they moved into the Timber Creek and Victoria River regions, violent encounters with local people did occur, and these groups, whilst speaking different languages, had associations and alliances with those from Port Keats. The people of Timber

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109 I was told by a senior leader, Frank Jinjair that his clan, Rak Nuthunthu, had moved from their country where the Yek Wunh clan is today. The Yek Wunh clan had been at Wudipuli but the current Rak Wudipuli clan and its leaders had reputedly been pushed across the Moyle River, following a series of altercations, from their country where the Rak Nganthawudi clan is today. Jabinee (2005: pers. com) said ‘The Warray and Larrakiya mob chasing Tchinburrurr. Pushed him from Nganthawudi to Wudipuli. Old Anglanitchi said “Okay you can have Wudipuli”. Tchinburrurr was muk muk (eagle) not goanna. Goanna was Anglanitchi. Tchinburrurr brought the name Rak Dirrangara down to Wudipuli from Thinti way’. These events may have occurred about 50 years ago. Certainly, prominent leader in those times, Tchinburrurr, was involved. Linda Barwick (2008: pers. com) advised me that she had also heard of such arrangements, as has linguist, Lys Ford.
Creek and Victoria River regions may have been informed about the explorers whilst they were still in the Port Keats area. Smoke signals were used, particularly in early times, to warn of approaching people and of potential danger. Early explorers often reported seeing smoke on the horizon. Stanner, on his initial visit, observed: 110

All the way down the coast smoke-signals went up in the bush every few miles. The tribes were evidently watching. As we breasted each fire we could see another signal curling up miles beyond. In this way our progress was made known.

**Influence and Change to the Demography of the Port Keats Region 1870–1935**

When the explorer Augustus Gregory and party were able to traverse the Port Keats region in 1855, stay for a month and see only eight Aboriginal people, it raises certain questions. The most pertinent is, given the propensity of Port Keats people to defend their land, why did they not mount an attack? As mentioned, my hypothesis is that the population at this time had been effectively decimated by disease and by events and attractions, such as tobacco, flour, sugar and other goods, to the south. Whilst the contact with neighbours to the north of Australia did not result in long-term occupation of Aboriginal land, the impact of disease brought by Europeans certainly did. Even though the Port Keats region was relatively isolated, it was not immune to the effects of disease, pastoralism, the gold rushes and the like. By examining the

national situation at the time, we are able to reconstruct what probably occurred in the Port Keats region.

Taylor (2005: 66) argues that in 1788, the Indigenous population in Australia ‘would have been around 500,000’. For the next century, it declined rapidly due to European expansionism, reduced fertility and increased mortality (Ivory 2007). By 1933 (about when Port Keats was settled by missionaries), the general population according to Taylor (2005: 68) might only have been about 20 per cent of its original estimated size. This extrapolation suggests that the Port Keats regional population in the early 1930s may have only been about 400 people. Stanner (1966: 148) maintains that ‘In 1935, 12 clans of three weakening tribes could only muster 150 souls’. He later, during the early days of mission contact, recorded about 200–300 people in the Port Keats region.111

Possible reasons for the decline vary and Stanner records that many people during the early 1930s were dispersed on pastoral properties such as Auvergne and Bradshaw Stations or around farms in the Daly River region.112 Some groups from the Port Keats region, including the Marri Ngarr and Marritjevin, were camped on the Daly River when Stanner arrived in 1932 (Stanner 1979: 81). Many of these people would have been seeking work, accompanying those who were working, or those who were hoping to gain access to rations, mainly tobacco, from the stations. In 1935, Stanner recorded 125 individuals as having ‘come in’ to Wentek

111 Stanner MS 3752: Series 1: Item 82: 12.
112 Stanner MS 3752: Series 4: Item 2: Misc. note books.
Nganayi when he and the missionaries first made their landing.\textsuperscript{113} Stanner (1966: 109) argues that the ‘network of relations was disturbed hundreds of miles away from the nearest European’ because inter-tribal relationships were so relative.

Disease was a key factor in the decline in population amongst Aboriginal peoples in Australia. The Macassans and other Asiatic visitors may have introduced the diseases that affected many of the population in the Territory (Mitchell 2000). Certainly, leprosy appeared in the Northern Territory at Pine Creek in 1896 possibly brought by Chinese gold miners (Darcy 1989: 23). It ‘approached epidemic proportions’ in the 1920s (Mulvaney 1989: 195–196). There were epidemics of influenza in the Territory in 1903, 1904 and the Spanish Flu pandemic of 1918-19 (Briscoe 1996: 1–16). Smallpox, possibly introduced by Macassan traders (or from the south-east), was devastating as Aboriginal people had no acquired immunity (Campbell 1983).

Hill (1951: 38) argues that the ‘Macassar-men brought ravage of disease … to the north coast – venereal disease, leprosy, yaws and smallpox, the dreaded mee-ha-me-ha’. There were two major outbreaks of smallpox – in 1789 (Hagger 1979: 18) and another in approximately 1830 (Rose 1991: 5). Fatality rates in areas afflicted by smallpox could have been as high as 75 per cent (Rose 1991: 5). Malaria was also endemic to the north-west region (Makin 1970: 70). In 1922, an epidemic at Victoria River Downs Station (VRD) killed more than 11 per cent of the

\textsuperscript{113} Stanner MS 3752: Series 4: Item 2: Misc. note books.
station’s population (Makin 1970: 143). Other fatalities occurred from venereal disease, tuberculosis (also called ‘consumption’), diphtheria, measles, tetanus, dysentery and hookworm. Stanner commenting on the Port Keats situation said that between the 1920s ‘and 1935, the year of the missions arrival, there was a heavy mortality from disease’. He recorded an old man, Muta, as saying that there was ‘a lot of sickness on stations … fever’. Kimber (1990: 165) states that epidemics had devastating effects in remote areas of Australia on Aboriginal populations ‘decades ahead of European settlement’. There was also the effect of sexually transmitted infections that affected fertility (Senior 2003).

Table 3A: Population Fluctuations in the Port Keats Region

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Influence</th>
<th>Population in the Port Keats Region</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1770</td>
<td>First Arrivals at Botany Bay</td>
<td>2,400</td>
<td>Correlated on estimate that Australian Indigenous population at this time was conservatively estimated at about 500,000. The Indigenous Australian population is approaching this figure today</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1789</td>
<td>First smallpox pandemic in Australia</td>
<td>480</td>
<td>Indigenous population decimated with 75-80% death rate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1790</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>880</td>
<td>Natural increase in population. 2:1 men to</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

114 VRD Station is about 300 kilometres southeast of Wadeye.
117 This reconstruction of population related to significant events is founded on the author’s research and reading of the literature. It may be debated and challenged if more evidence is produced.
119 Campbell (1983; 1985), Butlin (1983; 1985), Macknight (1986) and Kimber (1990) refer to these epidemics across Australia and the Territory and their effects. Campbell (1985: 357) argued that fatality rates could have been in this vicinity in ‘virgin’ epidemics, and a 45% fatality rate suffering a second smallpox outbreak.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event Description</th>
<th>Population Change</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1828</td>
<td>through natural means</td>
<td></td>
<td>women(^{120}). Based on average of 10 babies born per year. This may have resulted in more deaths through homicide because of fighting for women(^{121})</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1830</td>
<td>Second smallpox epidemic</td>
<td>50% death rate(^{122})</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1831–59</td>
<td>Population increases through natural means</td>
<td>440</td>
<td>Natural increase; about 10 babies born per year(^{123})</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1860</td>
<td>Third smallpox epidemic</td>
<td>25–30% death rate. Possibly introduced by Malay fishermen(^{124})</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1914</td>
<td>Spanish Influenza pandemic introduced in Darwin by returning WW1 soldiers</td>
<td>416</td>
<td>Approximate 20% death rate(^{125})</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1935</td>
<td>Movement to cattle stations</td>
<td>125</td>
<td>W.E.H. Stanner conducted survey at the first mission site. Other people (possibly 2–300) probably out ‘bush’ and on cattle stations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1939</td>
<td>Movement back to Port Keats due to Mission presence</td>
<td>300-400</td>
<td>Stanner’s estimate of population in the region</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1950</td>
<td>Mission well established</td>
<td>310</td>
<td>Taylor’s (2004) analysis of Stanner’s 1950 count</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1961</td>
<td>Natural population increase</td>
<td>447</td>
<td>Long (1961), patrol officer’s survey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1971</td>
<td>Natural population increase</td>
<td>776</td>
<td>ABS Census</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^{120}\) Campbell (1985: 357-58) points out that this ratio appeared in central Australia and it is presumed that a similar effect may have occurred in other areas.

\(^{121}\) Kimber (1990) and Campbell (1985) postulated that this may have increased incursions into other territories.

\(^{122}\) Campbell (1985: 357) argued that many women and children died in the second epidemic.

\(^{123}\) Based on Kimber’s estimate of a male: female ratio of approximately 9:5.

\(^{124}\) Campbell (1985).

\(^{125}\) Based on Briscoe’s (1996) estimates of the effect on Indigenous Australians.
Gold was first discovered in the Territory in 1871–2 (Makin 1970: 61–62). It sparked a gold rush in Pine Creek and Yam Creek areas. The Chinese came to the Territory in 1874 to try their luck, first two hundred men, and then followed by thousands many of whom stayed (Hill 1951: 129–130). By the late 1870s ‘the gold-seekers were drifting farther and farther out into the ranges of the wild blacks’ toward Daly River and beyond (Hill 1951: 160). Prospectors were also now looking for copper. Those travelling the Daly affected tribal groups such as the ‘Mulluk Mulluk, Bungabunga and Amadil’ whose numbers were all reduced (Berndt and Berndt 1987: 150).

In the mid-1880s, gold was discovered in the Kimberley of Western Australia and ten thousand miners from around Australia converged in that direction (Makin 1970: 78). They swept across the route linking Katherine to Halls Creek reputedly shooting ‘down many of the blacks’ (Dashwood 1899: 80). During these years of gold fever, prospectors began to infringe more and more onto land inhabited by Aborigines. There were attractions and tensions for both and the introduction of new habits such as tobacco and opium smoking and alcohol.

George Sutherland (McLaren and Cooper 2001: 10) brought the first stock comprising 8,000 sheep to the Georgina River in the Northern Territory in 1863. The next year, F. E. Nash drove

| 2004 | Natural population increase; improved health care and facilities | 2,400 | Based on Thamarurr Regional Council census. Estimated that Australian Indigenous population is 500,000 today |

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cattle overland to the Lake Nash area (McLaren and Cooper 2001: 10). Others followed including D’Arcy Wentworth Uhr in 1872 (Hill 1951: 166). Owen Springs and Undoolya pastoral leases in Central Australia were taken up in 1872 (McLaren and Cooper 2001: 10). Later the first pastoral lease in the northern region of the Territory was taken out at Springvale on the Katherine River in 1876 (Makin 1970: 62). Glencoe Station formed in 1878 and Elsey Station followed this in 1880 (Hill 1951: 168–169).

To the south of Port Keats, Fisher and Lyons took out their first lease on the Victoria River in 1879 and they were able to amass a massive 38,901 square miles (Makin 1970: 63). By 1883 the first cattle began to arrive at Victoria River Downs (VRD) and with them, large numbers of drovers (Makin 1970: 69). Buchanan established Wave Hill Station in 1883. By 1886, the pastoralists were having problems with Aboriginal people and hungry miners killing cattle (Makin 1970: 78). Later, the stations of Rosewood (1882), Auvergne (1886), Carlton Hill (1893), Bradshaw (1894), Waterloo, Legune, Bullo River, Mistake Creek, and others were formed and it was the start of an exodus by Aboriginal people, men and women, from the Port Keats region.

To the south-east of Port Keats, stations were also established at Florina (1916), Jindare (1917) and Claravale (1918). Aboriginal people drifted to many of these cattle stations looking for work, a new experience, access to valued rations and a passport to new relationships with other Aboriginal groups. The movement was to continue until 1968 when award wages for Aborigines were introduced.
The first detachment of police, led by Inspector Paul Foelsche arrived in the Northern Territory in January 1870. Hereafter commenced a period of relationships that were fraught with issues, particularly for Aboriginal people. Soon after, in 1874, a group of 186 Chinese emigrants referred to as ‘coolies’ arrived and Foelsche described these people as ‘of the lowest class, pirates and robbers’ and requested more reinforcements (see Foelsche cited in Downer 1963: 18). Downer commented that ‘Aborigines and Asiatics’ were the cause of ‘a great deal of trouble’ for their reputation of spearing cattle and using, in the case of the Chinese, ‘the knife’ (Downer 1963: 18). In fact, when Fannie Bay gaol officially opened in 1883, eighteen of the thirty-one prisoners were Chinese (Dewar 1999: 1). In 1871–72, the commencement of the gold rush in the Territory had caused a ‘convulsion’ of gold-miners and associated problems (Downer 1963: 27). During the Depression, the ‘drying-up of hundreds of claims’ also made the miners desperate and tensions were high (Downer 1963: 27).

The relationship between the police and Aboriginal people was tense. However, it was a situation that was not uncommon for the Port Keats people and other groups. They were used to engaging with outside militaristic-type forces. No doubt they saw the police as the body who represented and protected the ‘white-fellas’. The tension may have been exacerbated when the police engaged trackers from other tribal groups who were often as not, traditional enemies of the Port Keats people. I believe, however, from my discussions with many of the older men and women, the Port Keats people also saw the police as noble and worthy adversaries. This relationship over time, possibly after the missionaries moved in, shifted to one of visualising the police as ‘protectors and implementers of the law’ for Indigenous and non-Indigenous people alike. Interestingly, some of the police who were involved in incidents
such as that involving Nemarluk (which I will describe later in this chapter) returned years later to meet the people they had been pursuing.\footnote{127 Felix Bunduck told me that he recognised a retired police officer as one Constable Kenneth because he had fingers missing that had been chopped off with a tomahawk by Felix’s father, Nym Bunduck.}

The events that have been described refer to early periods of contact leading up to the 1930s. The influx of non-Indigenous people, horses, stock and associated infrastructure created tensions. Captain Joe Bradshaw of Bradshaw Station (cited in McLaren and Cooper 2001: 38) stated ‘Some of them are the greatest nuisance in Australia. I have been nearly speared by them within two or three miles of my own homestead’.

The repercussions of the build-up of a non-Indigenous population, decimation by disease and conflict with and within the Indigenous population, and uncertainties and tensions, produced results that brought the state of affairs to another level. Stanner (1966: 110) argues that as the demography in the regions changed, some ceremonies lapsed whilst the structure of others changed. Such a state was to eventually create a situation that the authorities of the day could no longer ignore. It is now necessary to describe some of the events that occurred during the period 1870 to 1935 because they illustrate how Indigenous leadership responded, often with violence to intrusion upon their land, and how the government reacted.
Local Animosities, Readjustments, and Retaliations

Stanner (1966: 109–110) and local Aboriginal people refer to an intense period of conflict prior to his arrival at Port Keats. When tribal groups were attracted to the European settlements for their goods, the result was fights, jealousies and ‘murderous intercourse’ (Stanner 1966: 110). Such conflict was both internal and external. Muta, an informant of Stanner, referred to the ‘Soldiers from the Moil’ and ‘Murinbata fights’.128 Muta said that ‘Perdjert and Wagin always arguing – big rows’.129 He referred to ‘Anyway fight’ that is, as Stanner says, ‘irrespective of moietyes or sections’.130 Muta spoke about constant fights over women and deaths that occurred from sorcery before the mission arrived. Muta told Stanner ‘Young man wanted women. Some men wanted more women. That’s all fight about’.131

Stanner had aligned himself with his main informants, the Murrinh-patha and he commented:132

I had one or two scares with the Maringar, another (plains) tribe, which put me off going through unknown country alone … Everything indicated to me how the Murinbata had been screened off by a wall of fear and enmity.

128 Stanner 1959: Series 3: Item 12
129 Ibid
130 Ibid.
131 Ibid.
From the 1870s, the effects of European settlement reverberated throughout the region, and were felt, even if the contact was not first hand.

A series of incidents involving murders also occurred during this period against non-Aboriginals. As miners and others decided to expand their horizons, the results were swift and bloody. Incidents that had far-reaching consequences throughout the region are as follows.

**The Pine Creek and Daly Killings**

In 1878, James Ellis was murdered south of Pine Creek and whilst the Aboriginal offenders were being pursued toward Daly River, spears were thrown, and 17 Aboriginals were killed (Hill 1951: 139). In 1880, a prospector, Holmes, was killed at Collett Creek. In 1884, a series of killings that became known as ‘The Daly River Copper Mine Massacre’ occurred. Four white prospectors known as Houschildt, Noltenius, Landers and Scollbert were killed and the police sought retribution. A report of the time told of ‘terrible reprisals’ that took place (Downer 1963: 32). Five Aboriginal men were charged with the killings, sentenced to death, but their sentences were commuted later to life imprisonment. Corporal Montagu, a police officer seeking the killers, reported on ‘the superiority of the Martini Henry rifle’ (Downer 1963: 35).

In 1900, John Larsen, a Swede, was murdered at the mouth of the Daly River. The Aboriginal man charged with the murder, Dick, was executed at Bradshaw’s Station (Downer 1963: 33).

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133 One of the men, Nanga, died in Fannie Bay Gaol.
The police (Hill 1951: 250) shot one of his accomplices, Big George. Downer (1963: 37) commented that the execution served as a ‘lesson to the, black man’. It also served as a ‘shield, to the courageous people who, even though in their own interest, were trying to explore the resources of the Territory and exploit them’ (Downer 1963: 37). Downer justified his comments by arguing that in the 40 years until the Territory Police force was taken over by the Commonwealth; 97 murders were recorded, with 72 being committed by Aborigines (Downer 1963: 46).

**The Bradshaw Killings**

In November 1905, Fred Bradshaw set out in the oil launch *Bolwarrah* to Darwin (Makin 1972: 95). On board was Ivan Egeriffe, two friends and several Aboriginal workers from Bradshaw. According to Makin (1972: 92), Egeriffe ‘became the terror of the local natives, so tyrannical was he in his treatment of those working under him’.

They called at a small coal-mining site (known as Brown’s Camp) on Docherty Island about 5 kilometres from the current town of Wadeye. The Bradshaw Aboriginals on board ran away, reportedly because of mistreatment, and supposedly coerced by local Murrinh-patha people. Muta in 1957 said that ‘All blacks had run away from Bradshaw’. All stockmen. Wanted to take boys to Darwin. Killed by Kambut with tomahawk’. He said ‘Dangu and Nganbalangor’ were also involved. Four Europeans were killed and the two Murrin-patha men, Kumbit and Dongbol, were convicted of murder but the jury recommended mercy; evidence having been

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134 Brother of Captain Joe Bradshaw leaseholder of Bradshaw Station.
135 Also known as ‘Ivan the Terrible’ for his cruelty toward others, especially Aborigines.
136 Stanner MS 3752: Series 3: Item 12.
given at their trial of repeated acts of cruelty by Egeriffe in particular. The sentences in June 1907 were commuted to life imprisonment. Two of Brown’s mine boring party was also attacked but not seriously.\textsuperscript{137} When asked in 2005 about the underlying reason for the violence, local \textit{Rak Kirnmu} clansman, Bonivventure Ngarri, commented ‘Maybe they were, what you call it … intruding’.\textsuperscript{138}

**Skirmish at the Fitzmaurice**

Prospectors seeking gold in 1908 clashed with locals at the Fitzmaurice River. Hill (1951: 257) commented, ‘What happened to the warriors is not stated’.

**The Killing of Chinese at Brock’s Creek**

In 1912, two Chinese fossickers, Lo Sin and Ching Loy, were found speared to death in the Brocks Creek area. Mounted Constable Jack Johns and others were assigned to the case and soon discovered that the murders had been committed by Koppio, Katterinyan and Anyuana from the Fitzmaurice River country (south of Port Keats). Johns and his party pursued them back to the Fitzmaurice, an area Johns described as lacking ‘communication with Civilisation’ (Lewis 118: 19). On 22 January 1913 after capture and incarceration, the three murderers escaped from Fannie Bay Gaol. The police party travelled to the Fitzmaurice again. On the way they recaptured Koppio and in the valley the other two men. They also captured a notorious cattle-killer, Corrigan. Koppio was later hanged in the Gaol. This was the last

\textsuperscript{137} For further details, see McQueen, H. 1978. \textit{Social Sketches of Australia, 1888–1975}, pgs. 146–147.

\textsuperscript{138} Ngarri (2005: pers. com).
hanging of an Aboriginal person at the Gaol (Dewar 1999: 58). Katterinyan escaped again in 1916, returned to the Fitzmaurice but was then recaptured by Mounted Constables Cameron and O’Connor on 24 November 1916 (Lewis 1998: 82).

**Nemarluk and the Red Band of Warriors**

Nemarluk, of the *Rak Kirnmu* clan, Murrinh-patha language, and associates later immortalised as ‘The Red Band of Warriors’, killed three Japanese crew members of a lugger on 10 August 1931 (Idriess 1935: 117). The murders took place at a swampy beach inlet known as Ngarntimeli or Andemallee about five kilometres from Wadeye (Idriess 1941: 10–32). In doing so, the Red Band commenced its own private war against, not only the Japanese, but also intruders in general, including any Aboriginal people who happened to get in their way. It took over four arduous years before they were finally brought to justice. Nemarluk is now immortalised in literature and Northern Territory folklore. He has the distinction of having a school and street named after him as well as memorial notices at a prominent motel, and at the Fannie Bay Gaol museum in Darwin. Dewar (1999: 62) describes Nemarluk as ‘Like the best of all Australian heroes, he was a bushranger’. Further, she writes that ‘Nemarluk is viewed today as a resistance leader’ (Dewar 1999: 64).

It was during this time in the early 1930s that the phenomenon of Nemarluk and the Red Band of Warriors developed. I was informed that the ‘red’ in this case referred to the red calico

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139 This spelling was used by Ion Idriess (1941) in his book *Nemarluk: King of the Wilds.*
140 Furlan (2005: 56) notes that according to the records of the court case reported in the ‘Northern Standard’ of 9 May 1933, the episode took place ‘around the 20th of July, 1931’.
141 Today spelt as Ngantermelli.
headbands worn by the warriors. According to Nganbe (2008: pers. com), ‘it made them look fierce’. Nemarluk’s Red Band of Warriors was well in existence before his notoriety grew in the eyes of the white man. Brother Pye (1973: 8), a local Catholic missionary, referred to Nemarluk as ‘Chief of the Chul-a-mar’. Nemarluk himself was tall, wiry and strong. His chest was marked with cicatrixes from ceremonial activities and he cut an imposing figure.

In order to examine the alliances of the day, it is necessary to analyse individual clan and language groupings. The following table lists individuals as identified by Idriess (1941), the description he often gave them, and information I gathered during the period of my research.142

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Individual</th>
<th>Description by Idriess (1935, 1941)</th>
<th>Information gathered from Port Keats people</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nemarluk</td>
<td>‘Chief of the Cahn-Mah, King of the Wilds’</td>
<td>Rak Kirrmu clan – Murrinh-patha language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minmara</td>
<td>A ‘warrior’</td>
<td>Yek Yederr – Magati-ge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mankee</td>
<td>The ‘wrestler’</td>
<td>Rak Kirrmu – Murrinh-patha. Also known as Kintharri</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mangul</td>
<td>One of the men who killed the Japanese</td>
<td>Known locally as Mangul-Mangul; Yek Maninh – Murrinh-patha</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

142 Ion Idriess (1935: 98) was in the Daly River and Port Keats region in the 1930s as a crocodile shooter. He also served in the area during World War 2 as a member of the Australian Army. He ‘knew Nemarluk personally’ (Idriess 1941: Authors note). Idriess later wrote two books about events that significantly involved Nemarluk.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lin</th>
<th>Yek Yedderr – Magati-ge</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Montspere</td>
<td>A ‘men warrior’                                                                         My informants did not recognise this name</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nargoo</td>
<td>A ‘men warrior’                                                                         Rak Thinti – Marri Ammu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kummungeegut; ‘white men called Charcoal’ (Idriess 1935: 155)</td>
<td>A ‘men warrior’                                                                         Also referred to as Kum-munga; ‘one of the attackers of the lugger Pat’; Yek Wakal Jinnung from Table Hill</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wahroo</td>
<td>A ‘men warrior’                                                                         Rak Kirnmu – Murrinh-patha</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mah-lan</td>
<td>A ‘men warrior’                                                                         Rak Kirnmu – Murrinh-patha</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coon-an-pore</td>
<td>A ‘warrior lad’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Me-al-cull</td>
<td>A ‘warrior lad’                                                                         Referred to as Nigalkal by Port Keats people. Nemarluk’s brother; Rak Kirnmu – Murrinh-patha</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nungpare</td>
<td>A ‘warrior lad’                                                                         Belonging to the Nganbe/Dooling families. Nemarluk’s half-brother; Rak Kirnmu – Murrinh-patha</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tunma</td>
<td>A ‘warrior lad’                                                                         Probably Tunmuck; Yek Yedderr – Magati-ge</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Nemarluk eventually had five wives. His first wife was Marpu, or Marpoo (Idriess 1941: 11) and she was with Nemarluk when many of the incidents occurred (Pye 1973: 10). An old ‘witch doctor’ and associate of the group, who was somewhat feared, was Old Wadjee of the Rak Kirnmu clan.\(^{143}\) Associates of the Red Band, according to Idriess and my informants, were ‘Tiger’s Mob’.

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\(^{143}\) Informants advised that this man’s name is actually Mah-lan and that wadjee means ‘wrong way marriage’. In other words, he married a woman from the wrong subsection. Idriess (1941: 11) used the term ‘witch doctor’.
### Table 3C: ‘Tiger’s Mob’

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Individual</th>
<th>Description by Idriess (1935, 1941)(^{144})</th>
<th>Information gathered from Port Keats people</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tiger</td>
<td>‘Tulan the Tiger’</td>
<td>Rak Kimmu – Murrinh-patha; Nemarluk’s brother; referred to as Tupan by locals. Stanner records him as ‘Tiger Tulama’(^{145})</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chugulla</td>
<td>The ‘King’</td>
<td>Local people could not recognise this name. Idriess (1941: 12) refers to his country as being ‘along the Fitzmaurice to the Victoria’. Downer (1963: 139) also refers to him as ‘the tribal king’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Walung</td>
<td>‘Inkata of the Council’</td>
<td>Ngan.gi-wumeri sometimes referred to as Murrinh kura language. Mathalinti clan of Mathalinti Valley. Jabinee (2004: pers. com) said ‘Walung was locked up in Fannie Bay for killing someone, but wrong person’.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wandawarry</td>
<td></td>
<td>Ngan.gi-wumeri language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alligator</td>
<td>‘Grizzled old bad man of the Wilds’</td>
<td>Also known as Undul; Yek Nangu – Murrinh-patha</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chalmer</td>
<td>The ‘laughing giant’</td>
<td>Rak Wunardarti</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maru</td>
<td></td>
<td>Yek Nangu – Murrinh-patha</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chin-amon</td>
<td>The ‘spear thrower’</td>
<td>Djamindjung</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coonbook</td>
<td></td>
<td>Coolbook (Rak Nadirri - Marrijevin)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anglartchie</td>
<td></td>
<td>Yek Wunh – Murrinh-patha</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kerinbo Davey</td>
<td>The ‘giant’</td>
<td>One of the ‘attackers of the lugger Pat’ (Idriess 1935: 155). He was often in ‘Nemarluk’s camp’. He was ‘wanted for cattle-spearers’ (Idriess 1935: 155). Mathalinti clan of Mathalinti Valley</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^{144}\) These descriptions come from Idriess’s (1935) books *Man Tracks* and (1941) *Nemarluk.*

\(^{145}\) Stanner MS 3752: Series 4: Item 4.
Pooneemillar
Charlie

A ‘cattle-spearer’
Compatriot of Kerinbo Davey. Also often in ‘Nemarluk’s camp’ (Idriess 1935: 155)

Kergutt

The ‘lame one’
Shot in the leg by tracker Charlie (Idriess 1941: 133)

Idriess also mentions noted warriors from other clans including:

Table 3D: Associates from Other Clans

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Individual</th>
<th>Description by Idriess</th>
<th>Information gathered from Port Keats people</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pundek</td>
<td>A member of the band that had attacked the lugger Pat and who had ‘swiped at Constable Kenneth’s head but chopped his fingers instead’ (Idriess 1941: 14).</td>
<td>Also known as Nym Bunduck; Yek Diminin – Murrinh-patha; Felix Bunduck maintains that Nym (his father) had also had a fight with Constable Gordon.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Widjulle</td>
<td>Who had ‘speared the white man Watts and fed his body to the crocodiles’ (Idriess 1941: 14).</td>
<td>Rak Nadirri – Marritjevin; Informants advised that this incident took place at Sandy Crossing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wagon</td>
<td></td>
<td>Yek Nangu – Murrinh-patha. Also known as Djinu Tjimari.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deven</td>
<td>‘Scourge of the whites, he had been hunted by blacks and whites alike’ (Idriess 1941: 47)</td>
<td>A prominent leader of the Bradshaw area with intricate knowledge of the Fitzmaurice Ranges.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There were also members of the band that had attacked Constables Hemming and Hoffman’s patrol and speared trackers, Charlie and Bogey (Mulluk Mulluk language from Daly River) as follows: 146

146 Idriess (1941: 14)
### Table 3E: The Leadership Group that Murdered Renouf and Attacked the Police Patrol at Point Blaze (1929)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Individual</th>
<th>Description by Idriess</th>
<th>Information gathered from Port Keats people</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nudjic</td>
<td></td>
<td>Probably Narjic (forefather of members of the Rak Wudipuli clan but at that stage on land north of the Moyle River) – Marri Ngarr language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nanynyah</td>
<td></td>
<td>Rak Kirmmu – Murrinh-patha</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cambit</td>
<td></td>
<td>Also known as Kumbit: Yek Nangu – Murrinh-patha</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mooderish</td>
<td>In company with Nujooloo, he was accused of the ‘murder of Renouf near Point Blaze’ (Idriess 1935: 90). With his associates he attacked a following police patrol and speared two trackers (Idriess 1935: 84–99)</td>
<td>Yek Yederr – Magati-ge. Referred to as Mudooritcha by the informants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nujooloo</td>
<td>Associate of Mooderish. Accused of killing explorer ‘Renouf’.</td>
<td>Rak Kuy – Magati-ge</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The individuals mentioned are primarily from clan groups associated with Murrinh-patha clans linked by ceremonial trade associations and kin relationships. Also included are leaders from groups located further away toward the Fitzmaurice River and Timber Creek areas. It illustrates the extensive networks that Nemarluk, as a leader, had established in order to pursue his objectives. It also provides evidence of the general leadership network and alliance that existed in the 1930s and later; not just within language groups, but also between language groups and certain clans.
According to Idriess (1941: 13), Nemarluk and the other men were deeply dissatisfied with intrusions into their country. Nemarluk purportedly said ‘The white men are all around our country. Even though far away, nearer and nearer they come. They come to take our lands, our hunting grounds. When they enter our own country, let us kill them’. During an emotive incident in 2006, I heard a close descendant of Nemarluk call to some *Yek Diminin* men; ‘You mob are fuck all! If it wasn’t for Nemarluk, you would not even be here’. 147

Felix Bunduck and his wife Mary supplied the following story of Nemarluk’s altercation with the Japanese. The incident occurred on 10 August 1931 (Idriess 1941: 144). 148

Nemarluk and other members of the Red Band were drinking sake with Captain Nagata, his crew (Yoshida and Owashi) and some Tiwi Islanders on the boat Ouida. The Japanese wanted some women. Nemarluk agreed and some women were brought out. After a few days, the Japanese had not given Nemarluk enough payment. Mainly tobacco Nemarluk mob wanted. Nagata wouldn’t let the women go. Nemarluk then decided to kill them. He asked the Japanese men if they wanted some magpie geese. Captain Nagata said yes and he went ashore, with a crewmember as well as Nemarluk and some of the Warriors, at a creek leading into a swamp known as Ngarntimeli. Nemarluk and the Warriors took them into the swamp, Old Mangul

147 Nemarluk’s nephew.
148 Mr Bunduck, son of the legendary Nym Bunduck, passed away in August 2008.
Mangul killed Nagata, the others were killed as well, and Nemarluk and his mob went back to the boat. They paddled out to the Ouida and killed the other Japanese on the boat. The Tiwi Islanders took off in one of the dinghies, paddling flat out. They went straight back to Nguiu where they later raised the alarm. Mathias, who captured the first Japanese in World War 2, was in this group. In the meantime, Nemarluk and the others, full drunk and never having sailed a boat this big before, ran aground near In-da-roo, and then swam ashore.

(Felix Bunduck 2002: pers. com)

From May 1932, Constables Pryor, Fitzer, and Don, according to Desmarchelier (2000: 11) coordinated a search to apprehend Nemarluk and the other offenders. The police who eventually arrested Nemarluk were Constables Fitzer and Birt from Timber Creek and their four trackers, including Bull Bull and Splinter (Dewar 1999: 63). These two trackers, informants advised, came from Daly River and were from the Malak Malak language. Bull Bull allegedly had an intense hatred of Nemarluk. This famed black-tracker that tailed Nemarluk had himself served two years in prison for a tribal murder concerning ‘kidney-fat-business’ (Downer 1963: 48). Nemarluk, in 1933 escaped from Fannie Bay gaol by joining the sanitary gang who each day would march out to empty the effluent into the sea (Dewar

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149 According to Idriess (1935: 118) Marragin hit Nagata, however Felix Bunduck and his wife Mary, adopted daughter of Mangul Mangul, insist it was Manguk Mangul who dealt the first blow.

150 It should be noted that Felix Bunduck maintains that Constable Langdon conducted the first search.

151 Bunduck (2005: pers. com) advised that – ‘Melpi was assistant of Old Bul Bul, my brother, and Constable Langton. Nemarluk was angry with Old Melpi because Melpi was trying to catch him. Marpu’s sister was married to Melpi’.

152 ‘Kidney-fat-business’ involves an incision into a person by another, usually an individual with sorcery powers, to remove their kidney-fat producing a slow and painful death. Father Leary advised me in 2002 that missionaries had intervened in such a process many years previous and they were able to intervene and save her life.
1999: 62). He hid in rainforest before reputedly swimming across Darwin Harbour.\footnote{Some informants advised that he did not swim but walked around Darwin Harbour. This in itself would have been a major feat.} He was apprehended near Talc Head, across from Darwin, but escaped and fled back toward Port Keats. He was captured again in 1934 near Legune Station at the mouth of the Victoria River. Constables Birt and Fitzter with trackers were responsible for escorting him and other prisoners back to Darwin.

\textbf{Figure 3A: Nemarluk}

This photo taken in 1935 shows a portrait of Nemarluk (courtesy of Kanamkek Yile-Ngala Museum).
There are various accounts of Nemarluk’s eventual demise. Nemarluk, according to some accounts, died of tuberculosis whilst in captivity at Fannie Bay Gaol (Pye 1973: 20, Lockwood 1968: 128). Stanner (1959) notes that Church records register the death of a ‘John Nimarluk’ in Darwin on 9 July 1940 and that he was buried in Darwin with Brother Quinn in attendance.\textsuperscript{154} Pickersgill (cited in Dewar 1999: 63) believes that he died in Darwin hospital. Others suggest that he may have been released from prison in 1942 when the Japanese bombed Darwin (Shaw 1990: 4). Widdup (cited in Dewar 1999: 64) pointed out that Nemarluk was buried at the back of the gaol. Ted Egan (2007: pers. com), a former Patrol Officer advised me that ‘Nemarluk is probably buried in someone’s front garden across from the

\textsuperscript{154} Stanner (MS 3752): Series 3: Item 14: 13.
prison’. Nevertheless, local Aboriginal people on various occasions said to me that they believe he may have died in Katherine after release during the first bombings. This could possibly link in with a 1942 oral story of all the prisoners being set free from Fannie Bay gaol and put on the train to Katherine. After Japanese raids on Darwin in 1942, Judge Wells supposedly said to the remainder of Nemarluk’s group, known as the Red Band, ‘Among you there are men I sentenced to long gaol terms for killing Japanese pearlers. I am letting you go. From now on you can kill as many Japanese as you can find and instead of a gaol sentence, you’ll probably get a medal’ (Dewar 1999: 48).

As mentioned, the Red Band had primary linkages with each other because of clan alliances. There were reciprocal allegiances with other groups through traditional trade, ceremony, warring, and economic factors. Felix Bunduck, when asked why Nemarluk and his band had killed the Japanese, answered, ‘the main problem was that they were the wrong colour and they didn’t pay Nemarluk properly’. He also said later that the Japanese had ‘broke their promise’ with regard to the timely return of the women. Today Nemarluk’s name is immortalised in Territory history if not Australian history.

**The Cook and Stevens Killings**

In November 1932, Adolf Koch, also known as Cook and Stephen Arinski, also known as Stevens, left the Victoria River depot for the Point Pearce area (south of Port Keats). They were looking for gold. They arrived at Point Pearce and then set off in a dugout canoe. Nothing was heard of them for months and then rumours started to reach Darwin that they had

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156 The desired payment would have been in the form of tobacco, alcohol, knives and tomohawks.
been murdered. Mounted Constables Fitzger and Langdon set off to investigate. In atrocious conditions, and at a time of the year when water was difficult to find, they combed the country.

Downer (1963: 138) reports that ‘in the heart of the ‘bad lands’, Langdon learnt the names of the alleged murderers. For two and a half months, he pursued them. One of the alleged murderers was Tiger, ‘full-blood brother of the notorious murderer Nemarluk’ (Downer 1963: 138). He caught the other seven suspects including Chugulla. In addition, he found six witnesses. In a re-construction, Langdon said that it appeared that ‘twenty blacks’ had speared Koch and Cook and then mutilated their bodies (Downer 1963: 139). The bodies were allegedly then put in a dugout canoe that was sunk. The ‘tribe responsible’ was the same one that had been involved in the Nemarluk and the Red Band murderers, that is the Murrinh-patha (Downer 1963: 140). The prisoners were sentenced to death but had their sentences commuted.

During my research, I spoke with many people about this alleged murder. It is now immortalised in local Murrinh-patha folklore, that Langdon supposedly arrested the wrong people. Locals are more than willing to ‘claim’ a murder; however descendants say unanimously that Tiger and his group were nowhere near the ‘murders’. Bernard Jabinee told me that it was more likely that the 2 prospectors perished in the harsh country through their own misadventure. Their bodies were never found.
Stanner’s informant, Muta, told him in 1959, that the two men had become lost ‘before old mission time’. Walan and Maru on finding their ‘canoe’ then tried to ‘trackum up, nothing there’. They did not try to find them because of ‘too many hills’. During the dry season, the police, including Mounted Constable Fitzer, ‘rounded up that mob’. The prisoners were taken overland to Darwin. Muta said, ‘12 years (imprisonment) I think been give it’. However, Muta also said that he thought the Aboriginals were innocent – the Europeans were lost ‘making it for Bradshaw (Station)’.

**The Justice System**

Dewar (1999: 28) argues that in the late 1800s at least, ‘Europeans could commit murder with little or no chance of facing the death penalty’. On the other hand, if the accused were Aboriginal or Chinese, they ‘did not stand much of a fair trial’ (Dewar 1999: 28). Most of the crimes during this period were related to ‘drugs, opium and alcohol’ (Dewar 1999: 28). She argues that the imposition of the colonial justice system at this time was standard practice for white settlers in Australia who have ‘always attempted to control civilian behaviour through the threat of imprisonment’ (Dewar 1999: 153). Other groups such as the Macassarese had cultural contact but had not sought to impose their laws, or needed to.

Towards the end of 1934, the number of Aboriginal prisoners at Fannie Bay Gaol increased dramatically. In July 1934 there were twenty Aboriginal prisoners serving life. By 1939, about 85% of prisoners were Aboriginal (Dewar 1999: 44). Following the arrest of Tiger, Nemarluk

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157 Walung as referred to by Idriess (1941); see Table 3C
and their groups, many of these prisoners would have been from the Port Keats area and most would have been serving long terms.

Prior to the 1930s, the Port Keats area was ‘Back of Beyond’ (Stanner 1946: 1). Occasionally police troopers on patrol, the odd dingo-scalpers and now and then gold fossickers would venture out into the wilderness. By 1935, there was a definite perception by non-Indigenous people that various Europeans, Malays and Japanese had been killed there and would continue to be killed. It was dangerous country that required ‘taming’. Dr Lynch, in the 1890s, commented that the ‘native’ thinks that ‘the white man is in the country to do something inimical to his interests and to exercise a malign interest. He kills the white man on the same principle that a white man kills a snake’ (Downer 1963: 57). This view was typical of how most outsiders saw the region, its people and its leaders.

Certainly, there was stigmatisation outside of Port Keats itself. Port Keats began to be known as the ‘Wild Lands’ (Idriess 1941: 4), the ‘bad lands’ (Downer 1963: 138), a region ‘far beyond the limits of settlement’ (Stanner 1973: 2), and as the epitome of ‘the Last Frontier’ (Powell 1996: 5). Stanner (1973: 2–3) maintained that during the 1930s when he first thought of visiting the area it was regarded by outsiders as ‘inaccessible, far beyond the economic margin, wild, and supposedly inhabited by very ferocious blacks’.
Implications for Leadership

Visitors from the north would have made occasional contact with Aboriginal people in the Port Keats region for centuries at least. When Darwin was first occupied by Goyder and 135 men in 1869, the contact with local inhabitants, the Larrakeyah, was immediate (Hill 1951: 92–93). The people from Port Keats were cohorts with the Larrakeyah particularly for ceremony, trade and marriage and they would have been made aware of the goods, particularly tobacco, of the new settlers. Even at this early stage, stories about Europeans would have spread to Port Keats.

Therefore, in the 1880s when Bradshaw and other cattlemen began to look for good country to graze their stock south of Port Keats, Aboriginal groups probably saw this as their opportunity to engage. At about the same time the Northern Territory gold rush commenced and commensurate with it was an influx of Chinese and other prospectors of various ethnic backgrounds. Clan leaders in the Port Keats region would have heard of the hordes of miners spreading from Darwin and Pine Creek as they looked for goldfields that would make them rich. However, the engagement with the miners may have been disappointing; it was the time of the Depression and most of the prospectors were virtually destitute, let alone willing to share their material goods with Aboriginal people.

The Aboriginal leaders were jointly responsible for decision-making in terms of survival and social well-being. Some made the decision to join the cattlemen who needed workers and there rapidly began an exodus of men, women and children to camp in or on the outskirts of
cattle stations and depots. The men obtained work on the stations and occasionally the women as cooks and domestics. There was a desire by Aboriginal people to engage with the newcomers particularly as they became introduced to Western commodities such as tobacco, flour, sugar, bullock meat and the like.

The structure of Indigenous society is sometimes depicted as being rigid and inflexible (Evans 1996) however in this case the reaction of the Indigenous leadership was adaptive and pragmatic. During the exodus that occurred, there emerged an ability and flexibility for the clan and tribal groups to survive ‘off-country’. Indeed, as Stanner (1979: 47) argues, the tribes were not ‘self-sufficing entities’ but inter-dependent in many ways. Marriage, trade, ceremony, and other relationships fundamentally linked groups from Port Keats to those in the southwest. There were networked structures of interdependence and as Stanner (1979: 48) described, a ‘network of structural interconnections’ on a much broader scale that was nurtured by influential and skilful men. Groups utilised such interconnections to interact with distant neighbours, and through the country of others, to be nearer the European sources of food and goods. This method of engagement through interconnection underlines events from these early days to the present.

Some people stayed behind to ‘look after’ people and country. Groups always on the go, such as Nemarluk and his followers, were disliked by the pastoralists and did not fit in to the non-Aboriginal world very well with its expectations of reliability and consistency. However, Nemarluk and others would have still been keen to have access to the new commodities.
Discussions with Port Keats men and women revealed that Nemarluk and others, through their status and authority, ensured that those Aborigines living on the cattle stations would have given them tobacco and other goods in exchange for protection and peace from other hostile groups, and from the likes of aggressive acts by Nemarluk and his followers.

Aboriginal people had their own unique system of economic exchange and the new way of doing business was often confusing. The newcomers perhaps saw the Aborigines as only having one key commodity, women, and were not always keen, it appears, to pay the ‘going rate’. Misunderstandings resulted which led to violence by an unforgiving people. It was a harsh world and often only the strong and wily survived. Intruders began to be turned on, particularly in the Japanese case in 1931 involving the Red Band, because it was perceived that they were not keeping their part of the bargain. The Japanese in this case were utilising the land of Nemarluk and his clan, the Rak Kirnu, and there were definite economic expectations. When the bargain was not kept, leaders such as Nemarluk acted swiftly. They had to, in order to keep the faith of the people who looked to them for leadership, protection, and sustenance.

At a time when the frontier was on your ‘front doorstep’, the non-Aboriginal authorities were keen to demonstrate that they had control. Whilst Aboriginal killings against each other were often ignored and even possibly some incidents involving Chinese, acts of violence against non-Aborigines brought swift retaliation. The authorities acted quickly, though with limited resources, in the gaze of a watchful media from not just in the Territory, but from other parts
of Australia as well. The detention of Aboriginals (and Chinese) was required to be a visible and action-based reaction to appease the minority of non-Aboriginals that all was well.

Soon many of the leaders from the Port Keats area were in Fannie Bay gaol, often serving a life sentence. They went from a locally controlled existence to an incarcerated one that was very different. They were involuntarily being indoctrinated into a new way that most would take back in some form to their people upon their release. In addition, most of the leaders that had been locked up came back heroes (contrary to the aims of the authorities); some such as Nemarluk arguably transformed from local notoriety to legend. Meanwhile the next phase of ‘protectionism’ and ‘assimilation’ with the aid of the Christian Church was about to begin.

**Summary and Conclusion**

This chapter has examined what the key influences were from first contact until 1935. It has described what happened as contacts and subsequent tensions became more frequent, how they were viewed, and how local leaders reconfigured themselves or took certain action. Some of the actions, viewed at the time as criminal by mainstream society, evolved into a form of local legend that personifies defiance and heroism, but also represents a repositioning and then reconciliation with a dominant culture. The disposition and example of the notorious Nemarluk and the Red Band of Warriors and that particular era embodies a notion exemplifying active engagement.
During the era leading up to 1935, early explorers and others were made aware that they were on Aboriginal land. They were often met with violent responses and the Port Keats people often relate such stories with pride. The dynamics associated with ‘successful’ protection of clan and country demanded strong leadership to survive. It also required close attention to relationships, alliances and affiliations.

History of early contact and subsequent phases or waves of influence provides some insights into how the construction of relationships between cultures is first made. Such engagement might include mining and pastoral industries or physical influences such as disease and disasters. It might also take a form such as war or missionary endeavour. In the Northern Territory of Australia these influences appear to be fairly standard particularly across the Top End. In some places the influences came earlier than in other places and because of their location were, in some instances, devastating (for example in Darwin with the Larrakeyah ‘tribe’). In other situations they took longer to arrive and the effects were occasionally buffeted.

How people interact with the landscape, particularly in terms of where they proliferate and prosper, is shaped by the physical environment. In order to understand the persona of popular leadership imagery at Port Keats it is necessary to explore these influences because in many ways they have shaped who and what the people of Port Keats are today. I argue that whilst the history of contact and the environment have influenced the general demographical

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158 The Larrakeyah language group, made up of various clans, are the traditional owners of the Darwin area. Port Keats people regularly interacted with them with regards to ceremony, trade and kin. The Larrakeyah population was dramatically reduced by the impact of colonisation from the 1800s. The Larrakeyah use this spelling, however Dixon (2002) spells it as ‘Larrakiya’.
development of Port Keats, it also influenced the leadership regime. It fostered the
continuation of relatively small, dynamic and responsive units of people who with their
inter-reliant, networked, nodal system of governance were able to withstand continuous waves
of intrusion and confrontation by making societal adjustments. Such leadership adjustment
will be examined further in the next chapter.
Chapter Four


This chapter examines the effect that the arrival of the Christian Church and its philosophy and practices had on the people of the Port Keats region, particularly their leadership structures from 1935. It examines how the Church restructured lives, transformed existing leaders and influenced the reconfiguration of some Indigenous moral codes. It analyses the dynamics that were at play and the strategies that were employed by the Aboriginal leaders to re-balance the situation, and then to stabilise and enhance their own authority. Further, it raises questions about what all of these outside influences created. In particular, did the transformation emanate and progress from a government or Church philosophical position or did Aboriginal people, through a process of considered adjustment, use the Church to further their own ends; or both?

Stanner (1979: 108) argued that most early observers had already concluded that Indigenous people were devoid of religious beliefs. This attitude, he believes, subsequently pervaded Australian responses for years and ‘weakened both the charity and the wisdom of much Christian evangelism’ (Stanner 1979: 108). It was ‘organic with the European mind of the day’ (Stanner 1979: 108). Stanner, appointed as an observer, was a member of the missionary
group that celebrated the first Catholic mass on country in the Port Keats area. The question arises of whether his later analysis was based on attitudes and actions that he observed during this first Christian venture to the area. What was the intent of these first missionaries and how did the new mission affect existing Aboriginal structures at that time? This chapter will explore some of these enquiries.

**The ‘Elderly’ Construct**

Aboriginal people classified as ‘elderly’ at Port Keats today, because they have had specific experiences and encounters, are products of eras, rather than classified by their age. They had first hand experience with the Church, and in some cases with the military. Some ‘went away’ to work as stockmen, crocodile shooters, or general hands and such experience classifies them differently to those who did not. There are only about 30 of such ‘elderly’ men surviving today and the number is rapidly diminishing. Nevertheless, their experience in the European domain coupled with their religico-ritual knowledge and accumulated networks, entitles them to a substantial power and authority base.

**The Lead-up to the Arrival of the Catholic Church**

In order to understand some of the reasons for the interest of the Catholic Church in establishing a base at Port Keats, an examination of events that were occurring in Australia and the political climate that prevailed is required. As previously mentioned, the northern area of the Northern Territory had been, for over two hundred years, visited by Macassan

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159 This group generally comprises those aged about 55 years and above.
fishermen from the Indonesian archipelago. Such visitation, coupled with Japanese activities, was increasingly creating unease within government quarters.

A sign of things to come occurred in 1863, when the Government of South Australia annexed the Northern Territory of Australia. In 1911, the Commonwealth Government assumed responsibility for the affairs of the Northern Territory. This period, 1880 to the early 1900s, marked an intense period of change for Aboriginal people. It also marked the start of a period where Commonwealth bureaucrats began to feel responsible for ‘looking after’ the affairs of Aboriginal people and heralded an era of protectionism.

The Daly River and Port Keats region had a ‘name’ and a reputation for violence and conflict from the mid-1860s onwards. As argued in the previous chapter, the activities of Nemarluk and the Red Band in the early 1930s reinforced this reputation even further. Coupled with violence in other parts of the Territory, the government of the day was keen to introduce a semblance of order. In 1911, when the affairs for the Territory were transferred to the Commonwealth, the non-Aboriginal population of the whole of the Territory was 2,848, of which 1,387 were Chinese. Aboriginal people in the Territory numbered about 20,000 (Lami Lami 1974: 2). The Commonwealth Government had to send a signal that they were in control and that non-Aboriginal people were safe from violence by ‘the natives’ and for that matter, visa versa. They did not have the resources given the huge expanse of the Territory to colonise and occupy the land or even set up depots. They saw that one way to do this was to introduce the division of the Territory into areas to be missionised by various denominations. Subsequently the break-up of mission activity was agreed in 1912 in Melbourne by
negotiation between an Inter-denominational Committee and the Under-Secretary of the Department of External Affairs (Lami Lami 1974: 244).

Because of these negotiations, the Top End of the Northern Territory was divided roughly into three denominational areas for the purposes of missionary activity. The Roman Catholic Church was responsible for the area to the north and south-west of Darwin. Lami Lami (1974: 244) argues that by 1914 spheres of mission activity had been decided, and ‘allowed no choice to Aborigines in the matter of their exposure to Christianity and the boundaries were arbitrary in regard to cultural blocs’. He also argues, ‘many aspects of the traditional social organization became radically transformed in a short time’ (Lami Lami 1974: 244).

**Catholic Pioneers**

As early as 1848, the Papacy had already divided Australia into provinces and dioceses of their own and the Northern Territory came under the Diocese of Victoria. In 1882, Father Streele, a Jesuit, was named Apostolic Administrator and the Jesuits established a mission at Rapid Creek, however, the ‘proximity to Darwin with its European and Asiatic population was the underlying cause of an initial failure’ (Gsell 1956: 15).

The Jesuits then moved their enterprise to Daly River where ‘gradually, the natives saw the advantages of farming and the civilizing influence good husbandry brings’ (Gsell 1956: 15). This mission was also later abandoned with the establishment of a copper mine that ‘brought the Whites pouring in like a cloud of locusts’ (Gsell 1956: 15). In 1906, the bishops in
Australia approached the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart, who were working in New Guinea and New Britain, to move to the Territory. They sent Father Francois-Xavier Gsell who arrived at Port Darwin on 15 August 1906 (Gsell 1956: 17).

Before the establishment of the mission at Port Keats is examined, it is pertinent that the philosophy of the Catholic Church be considered, particularly the ideals and focus of the missionaries. Such philosophy was to govern and structure responses to Indigenous people and culture for the next 80 years. Gsell (1956: 38), who was most influential at the time, suggested that:

The wisest policy, it seems to me, would be to serve the interests of the natives first: they are the least numerous and the least favoured; and just as a good mother at the head of the table gives the smallest and weakest the first helping, so might the natives be treated.

Gsell (1956: 38) explained that it would best be done gradually and that:

… rather than abandon them to their own devices, to an anachronistic social system which denies all progress, let them be joined, little by little, in carefully supervised stages, by white men who, settling on their own land, or near them, quietly and gently, will thus avoid the shock of mass invasion as they raise herds and plant fields. The natives
could become shepherds for these carefully chosen white men until they had learnt to raise their own herds.

Because ‘the natives have lost their religious heritage with its beliefs and customs’, there needed to be a replacement of spiritual beliefs (Gsell 1956: 39). In addition, they had lost their lands. Hence there was, he argued, a double duty to be fulfilled in terms ‘… of charity, in communicating his faith to his less fortunate brothers; of justice, in making what restitution can be made’ (Gsell 1956: 39).

This would be difficult but Gsell (1956: 39) explained that:

The two compensations, moral and material, march together. Obviously the transformation of a nomadic native hunter into a husbandman and a producer without destroying, or at least upsetting, his tradition is a Utopian idea, as impossible as the making of a Christian from a nomadic pagan before converting him from his erring ways.

Gsell practiced what he preached. He threw himself, often with limited resources, into the breach. He argued, ‘When the aboriginal sees the missionary not only giving material help but also plainly giving of himself without reserve, he is astonished’ (Gsell 1956: 70). Gsell (1956: 131) argued that everyone was better off for the new way and no longer were young girls ‘the
chattel of a degraded old man’. Gsell (1956: 131) argued that although old Aboriginal men ‘sometimes indulge in recriminations and express fears’ about Christianity, eventually the Church will ‘win … because the bestial customs of our aborigines will not withstand the long-term work of grace’.

**Local Leadership Collaboration: Mollingin’s Vision**

In order to better comprehend the apparent acceptance of the mission into the region, it is also pertinent to refer to a local story referred to as ‘Mollingin’s vision’. Mollingin had a reputation as a violent and ruthless man, who on becoming sick, dreamt a series of events. He had a particular dream about 10 years before Father Docherty began the mission at Port Keats. Mollingin, a sorcerer with a bad reputation, became very sick. As he lay on his death bed he dreamt a brown hawk accompanied him to heaven where he had visions of images such as angels, Jesus, and the Virgin Mary. He was given a song, *Mallkarrin*, to take back to earth. Mollingin at the time apparently did not realise the significance of his vision. However, when his compatriots for the first time saw the picture of the Virgin Mary and the story associated with her, they realised that there was a duality of meaning. Mollingin had visualised Mary many years before the missionaries and their Christian beliefs and stories arrived. Gregory Mollingin (2005: 1–2), who is Mollingin’s son, explains:

> This must be the same Lady, Mollingin had been telling them about.

> They returned to Mollingin and their camp at Kurdantiga to inform

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160 It is about a Murrinh-patha, *Yek Diminin* clansman known as Mollingin and the story is owned and told by his family who still reside at Wadeye today and are very influential in local politics. See Furlan (2005: 76-78).
him of what they had seen and their suspicions. Mollingin then immediately returned with them to the mission. He told them without any hesitation: ‘Yes, that's the one. That's the one I saw in my dream’.

*Kardu Mutchinga*, the image in his vision is, and was when Stanner first conducted his research, an important mythical being in Murrinh-patha religion. Today, the Malkarrin songs are now part of one of three key genres of performance that interlink ceremonial life, ritual, and relationships throughout the Port Keats region (Furlan 2005).

**The Port Keats Odyssey**

Bishop Gsell (1956: 149) wrote that he had not ‘forgotten the undoubted right of the more primitive natives to receive the Gospel’. ‘With the help of a map’ and no doubt the growing need for Aboriginal people of the Port Keats region to be redeemed and the pressure of government officials, Gsell (1956: 149), ‘searched for a suitable site for a new Mission Station’. Gsell (1956: 150) declared that ‘Without having seen the place, I decided on Port Keats’. Father Docherty was selected by Gsell as the priest who would lead the expedition.

Gsell knew that the expedition was fraught with danger. He wrote that he ‘knew that the aborigines of this area had a very bad reputation, that they had killed white men and Japanese’ (Gsell 1956: 150). Harry Luke Kulumboort (a *Yek Diminin* man) said that at a ‘big meeting’ in Darwin, there were a ‘few of us there’, they were told about the idea, and they had said ‘all

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161 Today spelt as *Muthingka*. This is sometimes interpreted as ‘great lady’ or ‘old lady’.
right'. It was decided to send an initial exploratory party and on 28 September 1934, they set sail from Bathurst Island to Port Keats on the St Francis. They had a number of ‘black boys’ (including Bathurst Islanders) and four men from the Port Keats region (Docherty 1935: 232). They arrived on Rak Kirnmu clan land which was deserted. However, a member of the crew, from Port Keats, went into the bush and the next day returned with Kamput, Nalpu, Mapunanh and Thangmak. Four women and four children accompanied these men. Other Murrinh-patha people were away at Daly River, Bradshaw Station, Legune Station and further a field.

Returning to Bathurst Island, they made preparations to leave after the ‘wet season’ (usually between November to March). Some of the Port Keats people living in Darwin were keen to go, some had already left (walking), and one man, Tommy, who had previously had been convicted of the Bradshaw murders in 1905 with others, then released, was also very keen to be part of the voyage. Other passengers included Harry Luke Kulumboort (Aboriginal name Palada), his wife Ruby, Billy Majjindi, Albert Anglitchi and Albert Muta and his two wives. Stanner, who was conducting research at Daly River at the time, heard of the venture, approached Docherty and was immediately accepted to go as well. Stanner (1973: 7) recalls the journey:

164 Ibid.
165 Stanner also refers to a person called Tjanama, ‘one of the black crew’. Stanner MS 3752: Series 1: Item 82: 3. This appears to be a subsection name, thanama.
So we sailed out of Darwin Harbour on 6 June, 1935 … My memory of the voyage is now indistinct: I was violently sea-sick for four days; but what with one thing and another – the elements, the need to nurse the over-laden lugger, the loss of touch with Ariake, a bad scare one night when we found we had anchored almost on top of a reef – it was a slow passage. Nevertheless, the sense of high adventure with which we had set out was still there when we anchored inside Port Keats, and looked at the unwelcoming shore.

The Australian Press of the day labeled it a “Venture Among Wild Blacks”.\textsuperscript{166} Stanner reports that as they moved down the coast they could see smoke-signals reporting their whereabouts as they moved from one clan territory to another.\textsuperscript{167} Stanner wrote ‘The tribes were evidently watching. As we breasted each fire we could see another signal curling up miles beyond. In this way our progress was known’.\textsuperscript{168}

They were led to a site known as Wentek Nganayi on Rak Kirnumu clan country, Murrinh-patha language, and landed. Stanner recalls that they were left ‘severely alone’ for several days.\textsuperscript{169} Kulumboort says that no one was there because the people ‘were all at Piyirt, Kura lenhiin and Kartirnu’.\textsuperscript{170} Others were at ‘Bradshaw, Legune, Auvergne and Daly

\textsuperscript{166} Stanner 3752: Series 1: Item 82: 3
\textsuperscript{167} Ibid: p 4.
\textsuperscript{168} Stanner 3752: Series 1: Item 82: 4.
\textsuperscript{169} This was probably while the leaders communicated and discussed the arrival with the other Murrinh-patha leaders.
\textsuperscript{170} Kulumboort: Tape A174.
When Kulumboort found some of the people at Piyirt, he said that they were ‘very happy’. No doubt, they were happy particularly because it was a friendly visitation, not retributive for the Nemaluk killings. Other people were located at Kura Lenhthenka, Kerntirnu and Manthype. Some of the people that began to arrive were Dave Kurawul, Nalpu, Kamburt, and Narburup as well as the young boys Johnny Chula, Paddy (his brother), and Thewath.

Stanner describes first contact:

At last with extreme caution a few old naked natives appeared, looked silently at us for a few minutes from a distance and then vanished. The next day a number of men came slowly down the beach toward us, leaving their spears behind as a gesture of goodwill.

Soon after that, according to Stanner, about 100 men, women and children appeared. Stanner later estimated that in 1934, when they had first landed, there were about 150 Murrinh-patha. Father Docherty was keen to convert people as soon as possible and hold the first Mass. Docherty (1974: 16) describes the occasion: ‘They knelt when the priest knelt, stood when he stood, and watched with interest the progress of the ritual. This was the first Christian ceremony the tribes had seen’.

171 Kulumboort: Tape A174.
172 Ibid
173 Ibid
176 Stanner 3752: Series 1: Item 150: 1
Stanner wrote that almost every night there was some sort of skirmish and although no one was speared fatally, often Docherty had to bandage wounds. On one occasion, according to Stanner, one man came toward Pat Ritchie and told him that ‘they were frightened of no-one, and that they had already killed several whites’. This perhaps was a reminder that although they had been accompanied and welcomed by Murrinh-patha elders, they were still only ‘guests’.

During these early times, it should be noted that people who accompanied the party were Murrinh-patha as were those that made the first contact at the landing site. The (Kardu) Moiil’, the plains people from the north near the Moyle River, were regarded at this time as the Other by the Murrinh-patha. Cumaiyi explained that senior men such as Billy Majindi and Albert Anglitichi went to places like Kulthil and Table Hill to bring people in and that they ‘had tobacco to give them’. Some people were still worried about the police. Pultchin and his son went and told the Perdjert families. Then people arrived from Kuy, also ‘Wudipuli, Nardirri, Nangu and Kulthil’. Father Docherty apparently started netting fish to feed the masses. This would have been a revelation for the Rak Kirmu clan who saw their land being utilised by the missionaries to feed people often from other clans, and whom they occasionally were in conflict.

177 Stanner 3752: Series 1: Item 82: 8.
179 Ibid p 15.
180 Cumaiyi: Tape A032
181 Also Murrinh-patha speaking groups.
182 Cumaiyi: Tape A032
Deborah Gordon (2004: 185–186) argues that it was ‘readily apparent … that the Wadeye people, who had come down from Darwin to assist Docherty, saw the arrival of the priest in their country as a great windfall’. The support that was given to the missionaries, argues Gordon (2004: 186), ‘augment the theory that it was they who instigated the mission at Port Keats’. I agree, and further argue that the arrival had possibly been engineered by the Murrinh-patha leaders in Darwin as a means of further beneficial access to resources and protection from a range of ‘outsiders’ including possibly, the police.\footnote{Werntek Nganayi was on land owned by Nemarluk, Tiger and the other Rak Kirmnu clansmen.}

After a few years, the site chosen at Port Keats, Werntek Nganayi, was decided to be unsuitable. An important problem with the site was that it was ‘Not central to all tribes’ (Docherty in Pye 1973: 29). In 1936, Docherty and Brother Quinn began to explore for a better site. Gordon (2004: 199) states that it was ‘Tommy who pointed out the new site for the new mission site’. This is supposedly ‘Tommy’ who was involved in the 1905 Bradshaw murders and who travelled down from Darwin with Docherty.\footnote{Tommy was a Murrinh-patha man. Gsell (1956: 150) pointed out that ‘murderer’ Tommy had ‘asked’ him if he could ‘accompany Father Docherty’ on the initial trip to Port Keats.} Stanner (1973: 10) explains:

Then in 1938, Fr Docherty chose what is now the permanent home, a place named Idigi, nine or ten miles further south, on a rocky, ironstone ridge, overlooking a sea of mangrove through which a hidden arm of the Port allows a small boat to approach, if it uses the tides. I seem to remember Fr Docherty telling me that he was guided
to the place by one Tjimari, or “Waggon”, whom I had first met in gaol (perhaps I should say the gaol) in Fannie Bay in 1932.

Father Docherty was a hard-working, practical man and he led by example. He and his followers began work with great passion. They cleared a boat landing and an airstrip. In 1939, they also began to erect buildings including a Presbytery, Convent and Church. They used local ironwood bark to construct a hospital, dispensary, brothers quarters, dining room, kitchen and school. Sisters of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart arrived on 17 April 1941. Pye (1973: 31) recalls:

The sisters collected the little girls and took them to live in the Convent with them. Cleaned them up. Put them to school. Fed and cared for them, giving them a kindness not known before. The black world was then not a women or girl’s world.

There was much to do as Reverend Cosgrove (1941: 236) wrote in the Annals:

As soon as the sisters settle down they will endeavour to gather the children into a school and teach them the truths of the Catholic faith,

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185 Waggon was also Murrinh-patha.
187 Ibid.
together with reading, writing and ‘rithmetic adapted to their standard of life. They also have plans for teaching them such useful occupations as sewing, spinning and weaving, mat and basket making. Cooking, washing and ironing will also form part of their training.

Sister Magdalan, who is still resident at Wadeye today, elaborates on how the dormitory system commenced: 188

And then we were no sooner settled in. Got in that same night. Some of the elders arrived up with a crowd of girls. They said they wanted to live with the Sisters. We hadn’t even thought of that. (Laughs) … Of course, all they had to bring was a blanket and something to sleep on … So they did. They came, about ten of them.

According to Sister Magdalen, the youngest child was ‘about seven’ and the eldest ‘about ten or eleven’. 189 Sister describes the boys’ interest in coming to school: ‘There was a store room in the middle: I had a classroom there. And the blessed boys wanted to come to school too, of course, so there was about six or seven of those’. 190

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189 Ibid.

Sister Magdalen pointed out that the work activities were mixed with religious instruction:

Trying to teach them to make things … That was what Father Docherty wanted. He had them gardening: he had a garden going, a good garden, While they were pulling the weeds up he’d be telling them Bible stories and showing them pictures … They were never idle, they were doing something all the time.

Brother Pye commenced work on a garden with tropical trees and vegetables utilising local labour both men and women. In 1941, a new school was built out of local cypress pine and the airstrip was extended (Pye 1973: 30–31).

On 17 February 1942, the sisters were ordered, by government authorities, to travel by boat to Darwin immediately. When they entered Darwin Harbour three days later, Darwin had been bombed and ‘On drawing into the remains of the wharf, they saw dead and dying everywhere’ (Pye 1973: 31). However, during the war, the priests, brothers and lay missionaries stayed on at Wadeye. In August 1942, the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) arrived by ship. They ‘set up a radar station at Mt Goodwin’ and remained until 1945 (Pye 1973: 32). Memories of

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192 Mt Goodwin is about five kilometres from the township of Wadeye. Remains of the radar and machine gun bunkers can still be seen today.
local Aboriginal people of the military are very positive with locals attending their open-air pictures and competing with them in sporting events.

Whilst the war had a massive impact on Darwin and other parts of the Territory, life went on at Port Keats. The sisters had temporarily left but it appears that Docherty saw this as a momentary set back and he continued the material and spiritual endeavours undaunted. The military based themselves at Wadeye for some time and Docherty cemented firm relationships with them. He no doubt saw their presence (and equipment) as beneficial toward the ongoing development of the community and the people.

Many life-stories were collected during my period of research, and it is not possible to record them all in this thesis. However, a selection of what is regarded as key and representative of the collection, will be presented as case studies. Case Study A is of a senior leader, still prominent today, who was present during the early mission days.

**Box 4A: Life History, Case Study A**

**Patrick Nudjulu**

Patrick Nudjulu is a senior leader today in regional ceremonial, authority and social spheres. He was born in July 1927 and lives at Kuy, an outstation about 30 kilometres from Wadeye. His language is Magati-ge and his clan is *Rak Kuy*. Patrick’s Aboriginal name is Palambu and
he was born and named after the creek known as Palambu Creek. His father’s name was Peter Wunggu Nudjulu (Rak Kuy clan). His mother’s name was Margaret Mary Nambinimbuk (Rak Kuy clan). When he was describing their clans, Patrick mentioned that Rak Kuy clans people were ‘light’ and Rak Yeddairt clan were ‘heavy’. I believe that he was referring to their language.

Patrick made it clear that whilst Murrin-patha language groups and others had incorporated the moiety and sub-sections from the Kimberley region, they the Magati-ge had resisted such influence. His early memories include Father Docherty coming across to Nitin, a creek a kilometre from Kuy looking for water. Docherty took some people back to the Old Mission site and later revisited the group. When Patrick was about 13-14 years old, he was taken to the Old Mission.

Patrick says that they began work at the mission at 6 am and then at 7 am had breakfast of flour and damper. They would then work all day. He was a gardener and one of his jobs was to collect wallaby manure for the plants. Sister Emmanuel was his teacher at school and Patrick during this period lived in the dormitory. He remembers Brother Pye as a ‘good bloke’. According to Patrick, Brother Quinn, he says with considerable admiration, ‘was a hard man’. Patrick says that Quinn was also a ‘very good bare knuckle fighter’. Patrick spent about eight years in the boy’s dormitory.

It was around about this time that Patrick returned to Nitin and the Second World War commenced. Docherty, Quinn, Pye and many others remained in the Port Keats region
throughout the war. Patrick remembers not being allowed to have ‘bushfires – or fire in the camp’ because of the threat of Japanese air attack. He stayed with his family in the Port Keats region throughout the war and can recall regular wartime flights in the area.

Patrick’s brother-in-law was Nemarluk and due to customary implications, he was uncomfortable talking directly about him. However, he did comment that ‘Nemarluk was a good man because there was a big mob of miners and Japanese coming into our country. If he (Nemarluk) didn’t do what he did, well maybe might be different today’.

Patrick (2006) is still going strong as he nears the age of 80. He oversees ceremonies, helps settle disputes, advocates for the rights of certain groups that he feels have been wronged, attends local government council meetings, and negotiates with visiting politicians, dignitaries and other officials. Memorable moments include one occasion when the Northern Territory Commissioner of Police was giving an address to the Thamarrurr Regional Council. Patrick arrived late but walked straight into the middle of the meeting extended his hand to the Commissioner and said ‘And how are we today?’ as if to say, we can start the meeting now!

On another occasion following some youth group fights, he expressed great consternation that a police officer had asked him for his walking stick for fear Patrick might attack someone. The officer possibly thought it might be used as a weapon. However Patrick, who said later that he was trying to diffuse the conflict, and others considered this a great slight on his character and debate ensued for some time. The carrying of a woomera (spear-thrower) in Thamarrurr society is considered a symbol of authority and leadership; in today’s world the walking stick is often seen an extension of that symbol.
Father Docherty left Wadeye in June 1958. Father John Leary M.S.C. was officially appointed as Superintendent in December 1958. Leary recalls: 193

I went north intending to work for the Aborigines, but I believe I quickly ended up working with them … I am now firmly convinced that no one, in my field at least, can be an effective giver unless he or she first becomes a learner.

Father Leary argues ‘the promise of education played a pivotal role in making positive changes to some of the less desirable tribal customs’. 194 At one stage during the early years, Father Leary, concerned about the future for the dormitory educated children ‘explained to the elders of Port Keats that their newly educated children might one day die early, because of payback’. 195 Leary pointed out that, ‘The elders promised to stop the custom 48 years ago, and they have kept their word to this day’. 196

As time went on, government policy was to have a big impact on the mission and the lives of the people there. 197 As people developed skills, they were actively encouraged to broaden their horizons by the mission authorities, and seek work outside the mission. Many, for instance went to work in the pastoral, fishing and crocodile industry, the railway, military and

194 Ibid.
195 Ibid. ‘Payback’ is a form of traditional retaliation for perceived wrong doings.
196 Ibid.
197 It should be noted that while the Commonwealth Government had an interest, it was not until the 1960s that government programs were evolved to aid the missionaries who had worked for many years ‘unaided and unsung’ (Giese 1990: 11)
elsewhere. Often the mission would arrange a plane to transport them to a cattle station for the season and then arrange their transport back. They worked hard, side by side with non-Aboriginals and received some cash and the rest in beef and rations. Many people still talk warmly about those days today. Some became head stockman and other types of ‘bosses’.

Father Leary was at Wadeye from 1958 to 1963. He was instrumental in activities at Daly River. Other Priest Superintendents including Fathers O’Brian, Flynn, Sims, and Fallon followed. Pye (1973: 41) points out that Fathers Sims and Fallon in the early 1970s concentrated on spiritual life ‘in line with modern adjustment’.

Missionaries used the system of dormitories extensively throughout not only the Northern Territory, but also other parts of Australia. Tonkinson (1974: 33) for instance comments on the system as he observed it in Jigalong, Western Australia. The missionaries: 198

... placed all school-age children in dormitories. This policy had a twofold purpose; it provided the missionaries with a captive audience, and it partially separated the children from their parents and what the missionaries considered to be the pernicious influences of Camp life.

Gsell (1956: 119) argued in favour of the policy of ‘bringing in’ children to a Christian environment:

198 The missionaries in this case were from the Apolistic Church of Australia.
Children are the common possession of their parents, whose duty it is to bring them up with that love and care which points to their common duty. Clearly, to implant in the minds of our converts what was to them so far removed from anything they had hitherto known but yet was so of great importance, it was necessary to give them a robust spiritual and good material grounding.

Sister Magdalen has previously described her experience at Wadeye upon first landing, and various families bringing their children, mainly girls, in to live with the sisters. As she described it, the initiative came entirely from the people. Gordon’s (2004: 208) view is that ‘Their enthusiasm refutes any notion the missionaries forced the girls into dormitories’. Nevertheless, children, particularly girls, were regarded by their relatives as potential social, political, and economic assets of the clan. The elders in particular would unlikely be acting in isolation by bringing the children in. The male leaders were, and continue to be, astute negotiators of authority, alliance and power. It was more likely to be a gesture of good will to build relationships with the powerful mission in order to secure future favours and support politically, economically or otherwise. The elders in fact may have felt pressured to be seen to be closely aligned with the Church, particularly the Murrinh-patha who had brought the missionaries to this area in the first place.
Either way, the educational system of the time and the dormitory process had a lasting impact on the people of this era. Many of these people, aged forty and older, can all read and write to varying degrees. Most of these people, men and women are leaders in the various fields in the community, although this may have happened in any case regardless of the Church’s influence. All of the people interviewed who had been in the dormitory could still remember their designated personal identification number even though they might not have been asked such a question for over forty years.\textsuperscript{199} The number was called when they were to receive food, line up in the dormitory, receive spiritual relief and for other purposes. The number

\textsuperscript{199} Each child was allocated an identification number on entering the dormitory.
today is symbolic and implanted in people’s minds of an era of adjustment that had a commanding influence on their lives. Bishop O’Loughlin eventually closed the dormitories in 1963 (Gordon 2004: 303).

The impact of the Church was borne home, to me at least, in October 2004. We were conducting planning workshops with each of the clan groups and that particular week decided to spend extra time with the Rak Diminin in recognition of the fact that they are the land-owning group on which the township is situated and also because they have many pressing associated issues to contend with. Some of the main kardu pule and kardu ngalander men (clan leaders) spoke about their lives, but as the first day wore on due to constant outside interferences, we did not progress very far apart from briefly looking at a map and talking about prominent physical features on their land.

Late in the day, Laurence Kuloomboort, announced that ‘tomorrow we will get better organised and go and look at the country. Do you fellas want to do that?’ The next day most of the kardu pule were waiting for us early as were many other Rak Diminin men and women. About forty elderly, middle-aged, and young men, piled into the two vehicles. Laurence and Felix Bunduck, senior men, after some intense negotiations, announced to the women that their turn would come the following day.

We drove for about an hour and the road deteriorated until Laurence was making his own road referred to as ‘bush-bashing’. We came to a valley and everyone piled out. Laurence said that
we were going to the site of Batuk, the main dreaming site of Rak Diminin, and the place where the *kardu wakal* little people live (Kulumboort 2004: pers. com). We climbed a steep hill and arrived at the site. Laurence began rubbing the white powder off the rock on to himself and some of the other men did so as well. Using the *Dhanba* ceremony style (clapping and chanting with no didgeridoo), he began to sing the song for Batuk. The others, congregated close to the side of the hill, clapped in unison.

Laurence then invited us to take photographs of the people and the site and explained:

My father, Old Kulumboort told me about this place a long time ago but I never saw it. I am an old man now (about 70) and last year Alberto200 said he would help me find it. We searched the hills until I saw it and I knew it was the place. *Tek* the cockatoo yelled out to me and said this is the place. Go on he said you can have a look. The number one place for the Diminin. I knew because see up there is *Kalal* (white gum tree). He is moving because you white fellas are here but I have yelled out to him and said it’s OK. This is the place of the little people – don’t come here on your own or at night. *Tek*, the black cockatoo will kill you if you do anything wrong here. There is water deep inside the rock and sometimes it will come out. If you rub this powder then it will stop you from getting sick. Good place alright!

200 Alberto Furlan is an anthropologist who completed his PhD research in the Port Keats region.
There was a fair amount of reverence from all concerned however, his next statement was surprising:

This is only the second time I have been to this place. See these men (he pointed to Boniface Perdjert a recognised kardu pule clan leader of the Diminin and the other senior men) – this is their first time!

These elderly senior men had spent most of their life as flock of the Catholic Church – Boniface had even risen to the level of a Deacon. For whatever reasons they had not visited their sacred ngugumingki sites during the past sixty odd years. The next day, the men decided to take the women and children to Batuk and their other totemic sites. It was the first visitation for most people, except those that had visited previously with researcher, Alberto Furlan.

It is incorrect to paint a romantic picture of the mission folk as kind caring individuals that never deviated from their spiritual goals. These were hard unrelenting days and the harsh circumstances must have impacted on everyone’s behaviour and conduct at times. On numerous occasions, the people that were interviewed had stories of incidents that in today’s world would be judged as harsh, cruel, even violent. Most had memories of being treated unjustly or punished severely at some stage by the priests, brothers or sisters. On one occasion when I commented on what I thought was amazing achievements over the years by a particular sister, I was surprised to be told by a group of eight of the eldest leading women in the community, that ‘That Sister, she was the most cruel of all’.
One particular brother whose name was constantly brought up, had a reputation amongst most of these older people as a hard taskmaster and a brawler. Another had the nickname, given by Aboriginal men for obvious reasons, ‘Poison’.\(^\text{201}\) It must be stressed, that some of the priests are spoken about with great fondness, as ‘good men’. Father Leary in particular is considered in this category; they say that he has the attribute of being a ‘fair’ person and that he is considerate of everyone.

Many people were keen and wanted to talk openly about these matters. People frankly and honestly presented their life-stories and the Church days came up repeatedly. There was mixed emotions; often sadness, and almost a feeling of disloyalty and betrayal that the Murrinh-patha had brought the missionaries to their land, gave themselves to the religion, and the missionaries then left.\(^\text{202}\) This emotion particularly comes through when talking to some of the elderly. Nevertheless, despite the negative views that some people have, and the fact that many today do not attend Church except on significant occasions, the majority of people are still devout Catholics. The significance of these reflections by the Indigenous people is that this was a point in history where their leadership made a conscious decision to change how it would operate. From this time on, decisions, at least in the secular context, would be made in conjunction with outsiders, in this case the missionaries. This was particularly so for the Diminin clan, as everyone was now living on their land. The decision would not have been easy, but it assured, to some degree, their survival. Indigenous leadership was adjusted so that it deferred to mission bureaucrats for some decisions and shared the decision-making process on others. The Indigenous leaders however, still maintained primary leadership roles in the

\(^{201}\) I first heard the nickname for this Brother in 1978. I always found this Brother very helpful and passionate about his work however he had a quick and foul temper and hence the name.

\(^{202}\) A Catholic priest and a few sisters remain in the community.
Indigenous religious and ceremonial spheres, even though, on a few occasions, the Church attempted to intervene.

**The Pastoral Industry**

Another major Indigenous leadership adjustment was made when the cattle barons moved on to land near Port Keats. The leaders made the decision, in most cases, to engage with these new arrivals. They engaged seeking goods in exchange for services. Some though, made the decision to fight, or at least engage in guerrilla-type warfare. The events that occurred and the way in which the Aboriginal leadership reacted, needs to be examined in this context.

The pastoral industry in the Northern Territory can be traced back to February 1825 when Captain James Bremer of the British Navy, authorised the landing of stock at the settlement of Fort Dundas on Melville Island. Cattle, buffalo, goats, sheep and pigs were subsequently introduced from Timor (McLaren and Cooper 2001: 1). The second important period of pastoral expansion in the Territory occurred during the mid-1860s to 1895. At this point there began the large-scale leasing of land, the overlanding of thousands of cattle, sheep and horses, and the construction of homesteads, paddocks and infrastructure.

As stations were established, so also were stock routes. Overlanders, miners, settlers, itinerants and teamsters traversed the routes on land that was previously occupied only by Aboriginal groups. With the increasing traffic also came the occasional publican, storekeeper, butcher and blacksmith. Many early surveyors and settlers regarded Aborigines as ‘treacherous, cruel and murderous’ (McLaren and Cooper 2001: 36). They were blamed for spearing animals and
harassing stock. However, very rapidly Aborigines began to be employed on stations. Berndt and Berndt (1987: 61) in their description of the use of Wave Hill Aboriginal labour explain that people worked:

… in the stock camps, with boring and fencing plants, and in various activities about the station itself: for example, in wood-carting, wood-cutting, gardening, butchering, assisting the blacksmith, engineer, carpenter, and garage mechanic, and acting as “car-boys”. Women were employed mainly in domestic duties about the homestead: in laundry activities, gardening, housework, milking, and in the kitchen, the store, the saddlery, the meat-house, and in the manager’s dining room pulling the “punkah” and waiting at table. Some were also employed unofficially in boring and fencing camps, and other activities: for example, female labour assisted in the making of what was then the new road between the homestead and the police station.

Permits to employ Aborigines became compulsory but wages were not a condition of employment. Administrator for the Northern Territory, Gilruth ordered that Aborigines, ‘who have no idea of the value of money’ should be renumerated in the form of food, clothes and tobacco. He also commented on ‘numbers who are now indirectly maintained by the

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stations’.

There were dependants (including pensioners and children) but the industry was also heavily reliant on the Aboriginal labour force for its survival.

**Opportunities Associated with World War 2**

World War 2 had resulted in a critical shortage of stockmen and drovers. Indigenous labour was now at a premium. In addition, the Armed Forces began to recruit Indigenous men and women into their supplementary labour ranks particularly in the major build-up areas such as Darwin, Adelaide River, and Larrimah. Markets for beef increased dramatically not just in Australia but in Great Britain. Vesteys, the abattoir company, received large Defence Department contracts and also employed Aboriginal butchers and general labourers particularly at the abattoir established at Manbulloo near Katherine. Opportunities abounded for Indigenous people and they entered the general work force in large numbers.

By 1945 civil settlements and army camps were established at Larrimah, Mataranka, Manbulloo, Adelaide River, and Koolpinyah (Berndt and Berndt 1987: 155). There were many different tribal groups living together. For instance at Adelaide River, there were Aboriginals from ‘thirty-one language groups’ (Berndt and Berndt 1987: 156). Many already had a work history. Those at Adelaide River had worked as stockmen or drovers, for the police, at ‘odd jobs in Darwin’, on stations, at hotels, on the railway, fencing or fishing, gardening, and a few were from ‘the bush’ (Berndt and Berndt 1987: 160–161). The conditions were reasonable. Wages were paid and a range of goods could be purchased.

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205 Manbulloo is about five kilometres from the township of Katherine. Previously this group had been camped at the Cullen Settlement near Pine Creek.
206 Koolpinyah is about 50 kilometres from Darwin. The camp was later shifted to Bagot in Darwin.
According to Berndt and Berndt (1987: 249), the army camps demonstrated that it was possible to ‘introduce hygiene and sanitation facilities, a reasonably balanced diet, and a wage economy’. Berndt and Berndt (1987: 249) argue that the situation, at the time, provided ‘opportunities for Aboriginal self-respect’ and a ‘basis for Aboriginal-European equality’.

Indigenous people at the army camps worked alongside a wide range of people from diverse backgrounds. Army rules applied to all non-Indigenous and Indigenous people within the jurisdiction. Berndt and Berndt (1987: 177) commented that ‘there were common interests and a common sense of sharing’. The Army ‘included persons who were seemingly prepared to work with them, who provided opportunities for some freedom of choice, and who were not concerned overtly about making them different from what they were – provided the stipulated rules were adhered to’ (Berndt and Berndt 1987: 177).

**The Concept of ‘Going Away’ for Work**

There are several cattle stations in the Northern Territory and Western Australia with which Port Keats people have a long historical association. They include Bradshaw, Legune, Bullo River, Auvergne, Rosewood, Waterloo, Mistake Creek, Tipperary, Inverway, Carlton Downs and several others. Most of these stations were established during the mid-1880s and by the early 1890s people from Port Keats had begun to drift toward them; either to work or to camp on the outskirts. When children were born on some of them such as Legune and Bradshaw, the association deepened. Today for example, some people at Port Keats have a second and third generation birth association with Legune Station (Ngarri 2005: pers. com).
After the Church settled at Wadeye in 1939, the mission authorities organised transport by truck or plane for people to move back and forth from the stations. It should be noted that some people moved even further a field. Les Kundjil for instance travelled over much of northern Australia in his role as a crocodile shooter. A certain amount of prestige and stature also became associated with these experienced and knowledgeable people who went away. This was not restricted to men, but to women as well, many of whom still tell their stories today.

**The Effects of Increased Exposure**

Various environmental, political, and social influences, as outlined, wrought change to the Port Keats region. The following section details personal accounts of how leaders dealt with such influences.

The encounters, sometimes violent, at the turn of the century with Europeans probably signalled a new order of leadership. It evolved during a period of changing government policy including protectionism through to assimilation. During this period which covered the 1950s to the early 1970s, many of the men, women and families left their country seeking work mainly on cattle stations. In fact, when Father Docherty and the missionaries first arrived in 1935, many of the people were residing on stations such as Legune and Bradshaw.

The age group that survives today and who felt the brunt of a lot of this change is now aged approximately between 65 to 80 years. Hence, a few were born pre-World War 2 and were in their prime during either the war or some time soon afterwards. Others worked post-war in the
armed services or other organisations as the Territory was reconstructed. In order to begin to understand their experiences and the change they encountered compared to that of the parents and grandparents, there is a need to examine some of their extraordinary lives. The accounts refer to how they developed as individuals, often learning new skills in a non-Indigenous context, and how they were able to use these attributes in a changing leadership environment.

Box 4B: Life History, Case Study B

Laurence Karamengi Kulumboort

Laurence Kulumboort was born 1 January 1939 in the creek camp at Wadeye. His Aboriginal name was Karamengi (meaning the honeybee and sugar-bag) and his subsection category ‘thanama or thangari’. He was initiated, or ‘made a young man’ in the mission hospital. His father was Kulumboort and his mother was Jean Marie ‘Maudie’ Naiya.

At 16 years old, the Catholic missionaries decided to send young Laurence off to be a stockman. He subsequently worked at Waterloo, Limbunya, Ord River, Nicholson River, Rosewood and Spring Creek stations gradually building a significant reputation. The Vesteys Company owned most of these stations in the 1950s. Limbunya station was one of the biggest in the Territory and Laurence learnt his trade becoming one of the best ‘ringers’ in the region. After some time, he was appointed head stockman and recognised as an expert in mustering, breaking in horses and branding. He travelled throughout the region including Top

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207 Mr Kulumboort passed away in 2006.
208 The Australian term ‘ringer’ is widely used in the Northern Territory to describe a stockman.
Springs and Katherine to load cattle ready for transporting. In those days, he and his co-workers would drove cattle from the stations east to the trucking yards of Top Springs, which also harboured the notorious Top Springs Hotel. Laurence said that he did not drink alcohol but would wait two days for the others who did drink and then ride back with them to Limbunya Station. After nine months work, the mission would organise transport back to Port Keats.

When Laurence was 25 years old, he came back to Wadeye to get married, ‘promise way’ to a woman from the napithin subsection.\textsuperscript{209} With his wife, he travelled back to Limbunya and she commenced work in the station kitchen. He was paid between $500–600 per month, ‘good money’ according to Laurence. They also received rations including tobacco and salt meat. In 1961, he finished his career as a stockman and moved back to Wadeye. He then worked for the mission in the building team.

Whilst in the Limbunya area and as they travelled into Western Australia, Laurence participated in ceremonies. Liniga was an important ceremony place ‘in the west’. Laurence says, ‘we used to dance Wangga then, there was no Dhanba then’. Later as Laurence says ‘Murrinh-patha mob learn Dhanba (ceremony genre) … my brother, Harry Luke brought it back here to Port Keats. Then we went Dhanba way’.\textsuperscript{210} He mixed with many other language groups including Wailbri, Gurindji, and Mudbra.

\textsuperscript{209} ‘Promise’ or arranged systems of marriage were common at this time, but not so prevalent today.
\textsuperscript{210} Furlan (2005) examined the development and acquisition of song genres from other areas and their introduction and transformation into the Port Keats region.
Laurence explained:

‘They were good days before … all the silly people (today) they don’t learn now … too many videos. It was good life … they always respect me, the station mob, because I know the place. They were good people. They taught us droving, like going to school. They show good example … look after us really way. They, the young blokes should learn like us’.

Figure 4B: Laurence Kulumboort

Laurence (left) performing at a festival in Kununurra 1973 (photo courtesy of Diane Smith).
Laurence Kulumboort was one of many leaders who went away to work in the pastoral industry. Another prominent leader today who went even further afield was Bernard Jabinee.

Box 4C: Life History, Case Study C

Bernard Jabinee

Bernard Jabinee was born in the Church Hospital at Wadeye 11 June 1942. His father was Mickey Noord. Bernard lived on an outstation, until his recent passing, about 20 kilometres from Wadeye at a place on his clan’s land at Kulthil. His Aboriginal name was Numina Kubanarl. His language was Murrinh-patha, is Karrthin moiety, Rak Thipman (also known as

211 Mr Jabinee passed away in June 2008. At his request, excerpts of his life history were read out, by the author, at his funeral on his country at Fossil Head.
Rak Ngandirimarn) clan, thulama subsection group, and was of the Wurlthirri ceremony group. He was a prominent senior member of the regional leadership structure.

Bernard was initiated when he was about ‘8 or 9’. He recalled during that period, spending a lot of time on his father’s country, Rak Thipman. It was a time of much conflict. War parties intent on capturing women would come down from Daly River and Pine Creek. Bernard refers to these groups generally as Ngan.gi-tjemerri. He said there were also ‘Brinkin, Wagaman, Mulluk-Mulluk tribes and others’. He says, ‘sometimes the bastards would surprise us and we would have to run and hide until they left. Then my father and his brothers would join up with men from other clans; they were killer bastards then, and go and steal their women. It was fucking wild days then!’ Bernard says that the place of refuge when any intruders came on to country was Nganangul, an island toward the Fitzmaurice. They would walk, adults and children, (as they did not use canoes) across at low tide and because the going was treacherous, they were not followed.

At about this time W. E. H. Stanner, the anthropologist, was excavating at the site of Yada. This site is on Bernard’s country. Stanner had befriended Bernard’s father and they all camped at the site together. Bernard’s father at this time, the 1950s, was still making stone spearheads and stone axes. The women would collect seeds and berries and grind them in the rock hollows at the shelter.

Soon after, Bernard was sent to the Dormitory at Port Keats. His identification number at the Dormitory was ‘number 11’. He recalls his feelings of dislike for the dormitory life because
‘they (Father Docherty and Brother Quinn) used to belt me up too much’ (Jabinee 2005: pers. com.) He spoke about how he used to run away but the missionaries would pursue him in company with his father. He was then ‘flogged with nylon wire’ and chained up with a neck collar and chain. From then on, he had to go to school with the chain and collar on, and was locked to a bench at the school. Bernard says that if boys got ‘cheeky’, Brother Quinn would ‘make them lick the floor of the classroom to teach them a lesson. Or run around naked in front of the girls. They were cruel bastards alright’.

Bernard tells the story of Walung his grandfather who was accused by the police of murdering some miners, was pursued, caught and sentenced to Berrimah prison. However, Bernard says, with the general concurrence of the other elders, that the police caught and tried the wrong men. Walung holds a prominent place in Bernard’s memories of his youth.

At about the age of 13 Bernard ran away with his uncle, Jacob Cumaiyi. They walked from Port Keats to Daly River and worked for a while at Elizabeth Downs Station and Wooliana. When he was at Elizabeth Downs he has vivid memories of the station manager ‘going off his head’ and firing a rifle at all and sundry because someone had borrowed the truck without asking. As he said, ‘I shit myself!’

During this time, he recalled another uncle, Margarnba, deciding to walk a long distance because he had run out of tobacco. The uncle then got very sick. Bernard made a bed of branches in the tree for his uncle to have some respite from the mosquitoes but during the

212 See Table 3C
night, the old man fell out. Bernard spent some hours trying to lift him back in and commented, ‘by gee he was heavy’. Some time later, he went back to Port Keats to pick up his promised wife. However, the ‘bastards had given her to someone else’. He ‘got wild’ and left for a life with the cattle industry.

During the next fifteen years, Bernard worked at Litchfield Station, Carlton Station, Billinuna Station, Ivanhoe Station, Legune Station, Mirrawong, and other cattle properties in the Northern Territory and Western Australia. He is known as having been an excellent rodeo rider (as was his compatriot Benedict Nama) riding in various events in Western Australia and the Northern Territory. He later came back to the Port Keats region and joined Harry Wilson and Bob Nelson’s stock camp when Palumpa Station was being established. During this period working with cattle, Bernard also attended ‘five different types of ceremonies in Kununurra, Halls Creek and Billinuna’ that were performed by Aboriginal people from Western Australia. He said, ‘I didn’t dance much but they (ceremony leaders) wanted me to sit there’. He later was elected to the Northern Land Council (NLC) and served for many years.

During this time, he visited the United States and Europe.

In 2003, the first elections for the Thamarrurr Regional Council were held. Each clan group, by constitution, had the right to elect two councillors each. I visited each of the 20 clans on their own country with others, to explain why the council was being established, the process, and the need for each group to conduct an election. Bernard as the leader of his clan addressed

213 Palumpa Station or Nganmarriyanga was established in the early 1970s by the the Wodidj family and associate families. These people prior to World War 2 had left the area as the men sought employment on cattle stations in northern Western Australia. They returned to nearby Port Keats Mission some time after the war. They moved back to the Palumpa area, cut local timber for houses and yards, built fences, hand dug trenches to pipe water from nearby creeks and ran cattle. These were sold to Port Keats and other nearby communities.
the group with passion. His spoke about his life, ‘a bloody hard life I tell you’ and the need for the young fellas to stand up and work for their people’. He said that his life was almost at an end but he was happy that ‘blackfellas could now have the same rights as whitefellas’.

After about an hour of oration, and Bernard talking about the need for young people to ‘stand up’, he declared that he had decided not to sit on the council himself. On behalf of the clan, he said, two senior women would be the representatives. However, he would be ‘looking over their shoulder to make sure they do the right thing. They got to report back By geez!’ The women have subsequently been regular attendees at council meetings. Bernard rarely attended; when he did, he always had something to say which was accepted by those present with respect. He attended, on occasions, drinking sessions (or ‘caucusing’) at places such as Peppiminarti, and still had a very strong presence in the region. It would probably be fair to say that he was one of a few elderly men who had enhanced status across most clans and age groups.

Strang (2001: 53–75) may argue that Aboriginal stockmen were marginalised and controlled, however talking to Bernard Jabinee one got the impression that he would never stand too long for oppression in whatever form it took. His rites of passage in many ways may have been in a stock camp, but he was possibly one of many Aboriginal stockmen (as Strang argues) who indigenised their situation and at the end of the day survived in more ways then one. Bernard said that he has no regrets, a laissez faire attitude to life, was very proud of his career in the cattle industry, and interestingly did not speak with any real bitterness about missionaries, stockmen or anyone else for that matter.
Berbard Jabinee had been able to extend his networks beyond Wadeye, southwest to the Timber Creek area and into Western Australia. His networks also linked southeast into parts of the Katherine area and northwards toward Darwin. He was held in great esteem because of his knowledge of ceremony, ability to work in a range of environments, as well as his fairness, honesty and willingness to assist others. His kinship links and those of his wife enabled them to visit and stay with other groups for funerals, ceremonies and other occasions. The range of Jabinee’s networks are illustrated in Figure 4A. This figure provides a representation of the complex network of relationships an individual leader might develop.214 Such networks and its nodal nature are atypical of prominent clan leaders from the Port Keats region, and surrounding areas.

214 Note that the diagram is not to scale nor does it depict all of his relationships with other leaders and groups. To insert all relationships would have been difficult because of the complexity and huge number.
Figure 4D: An Example of Networked and Nodal Leadership in the Port Keats Region (Utilising Case Study C)

The oval area on this map gives a general indication of the range of Mr J’s key networks.
Key to Mr Jabinees’s Primary Leadership Nodes and Networks

Black – Mr Jabinee and his clan estate of *Rak Ngudanimarn*

Green – Relationships to the north through *nanthi kulu* trade and linkages developed during his work in bureaucracies (e.g. NLC)

Blue – Relationships through ceremony and marriage (through his first wife)

Red – Immediate political and kin relationships with fellow Murrinh-patha speaking clans

Orange – Political alliances developed through ceremony and his work as a stockman and later with the NLC

Purple – Relationships through *nanthi kulu* and *wurnan* ceremonial trade, ceremony, inter- and intra-marriage, kin, work as a stockman and NLC representative, and social activities

Another prominent leader with a similar spread of networks was the late Felix Bunduck.

**Box 4D: Life History, Case Study D**

**Felix Bunduck**

Felix Bunduck was born 6 March 1938. He passed away August 2008. His Aboriginal name was Yumbanyi. His father was Nym Bunduck (Aboriginal name Wudungardi), legendary associate of W. E. H. Stanner. Felix’s mother was Tulba. Nym had five wives with children to all of them. Felix’s moiety was *Tiwungku* and his subsection was *thelyerri*. He said that the
subsection name was useful when he ventured into Western Australia where they are still used on a daily basis.

Felix went to the mission school from the age of 6. He was ‘favoured’ in a sense because instead of staying in the boy’s dormitory when he was very young, he used to stay in the presbytery with the priests and brothers. He would do odd jobs such as cleaning shoes for them. One of the brothers gave Felix a dictionary, which he would read in his spare time. He continued throughout his life as an avid reader. He recalls the ‘army days’ of World War 2 and the radar station on Airforce Hill. The soldiers would often show films to the residents.

At the age of 10 years, he was shifted from the presbytery to the boy’s dormitory. His identification number was 12 and he slept on a flour bag on the floor. Felix was initiated at Wadeye. However, around this time, ‘Father Docherty stopped ceremonies. He wanted the people to concentrate on education’. When Felix was 19, he went, similarly to Laurence Kulumboort, to work as a stockman. He worked at Waterloo, Mistake Creek, Ord River, Nicholson, Gordon Downs, and Spring Creek stations and eventually became a head stockman. Reg Durack, the station manager would fly people back to Wadeye when the mustering season was over for the year.

Felix married his wife Mary in 1958. She was ‘right skin’ (subsection) for him. In the 1960s, Felix joined the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) and was ‘right-hand man to Corporal’.

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215 Felix was renowned for his ability to make speeches on behalf of his people often using eloquent English or Murrinh-patha. On occasions when there was heightened tension in the community, he would rise to the occasion acting as a broker and conflict resolver.
When he returned to Wadeye, he became a carpenter and was involved in building the first three houses at Palumpa station. When he reached the age of fifty he stopped physical work and became a councillor on the Kardu Numida Incorporated Council. Looking back Felix says, ‘work, job, getting married to right woman, right skin side, equal rights, being allowed to drink in the pub – these were the best days of my life’.

Figure 4E: Meeting the Prime Minister

Felix Bunduck greets Prime Minister John Howard at Wadeye in April 2005. William Parmbuk is in army uniform (photo taken by Ivory).
Les Kundjil

Les Kundjil was born 1 January 1935. He was interviewed with the assistance of another senior man, Terence Dumoo. Les is regarded as being a quiet, reserved man with ‘problems’ in understanding English. I know he can indeed understand English well enough, but others show respect to him by talking mainly in his native tongue, Marritjevin. Marritjevin, I am informed, is used less frequently because the people are now living in the Murrinh-patha homelands, although many people trace their ancestry back through this language and relevant estates. Nevertheless, Les in multilingual as are many of his era.

Les is the ‘number one leader’ for the Marritjevin and Marri Amu language groups (Dumoo 2006: pers. com). He was born at a place called Killilee (a hill). His father was Wundul and his mother Killilee. He estimated that he was about one or two years of age when ‘Father Docherty arrived’ although his official age on the records indicates that he was born in 1935, the year Docherty arrived.

Les informed me that his totem Tardiwullili is related to the story of the red kangaroo Wedirurung and the emu. He told this story:

‘The red kangaroo and the emu met at the same spot and then began to travel together. But then the emu turned right. The kangaroo went to Yeddairt (Red Cliff) and jumped – he broke the rock at this point. He jumped from waterhole to waterhole along the Moyle River until he
got to Nardidi. He fought the emu at Nardidi and ‘belted him’. They split – the kangaroo went to the hill and the emu went back toward Palumpa. He went to the two billabongs on Murrinh kura land at Nummariyunga’.

Les talked about the ceremonies and battles that the Marritjevin would have with the Murrinh-patha. When they brought a young boy in for ceremony, the Marritjevin would call it Murnonok. I asked Les what his understanding of Thamarrurr is. He said it was about fighting to resolve certain issues – issues such as the use of totems, the correct conduct of ceremonies, things such as who owns certain land, issues related to women and other matters. They call it Kumbunningimuwudi. He said each clan has one leader. They would send message sticks or ‘mail’ to other groups – their allies as well as their enemies. Groups would form alliances to fight against each other. In most cases the Menhthe and Marri Ammu language groups would combine to fight the Murrinh kura, Marri Ngarr and Murrinh-patha alliance.

The message sticks would call the other groups to ‘come to fight’. It would name the place where the battle would occur. Often it was at an area near the Moyle River, out from Kungarlbarl country. After the fight, they would then ‘share nanthi kulu’. Blankets would be laid on the ground and items (called Thairdimarl) such as pearl shell, ceremony designs, and spears would be exchanged. The Marritjevin word for nanthi kulu is warni. It would involve ‘Lumbu-Brinen (people from the Moil) and Lumbu-iltchi’. Les maintains it was ‘very strict’.

His father brought Les in to the mission sometimes. He stayed in the dormitory. Then his father would take him out bush again. The main reason his father would come back in was for
tobacco. *Jarrong* meaning cloth was another item that was prized. He was 18–20 years of age (called *tandjen* – the age group). His father sent a message to his uncle, called Baramik at Tchindi asking if it was ‘OK’ for Les to go ceremony. He agreed. Then he went for *Kum-bun-ningi-muwudi*. During this time Marritjevin, Murrinh-patha, Marri Ammu, Emmi, Menhthe, go together. He was sent to Tchindi – then went to the first point past Paraderr towards the beach. Before he became a ‘young boy’ (initiated), he was told he ‘would be a leader of the family’. He was the last man of the family and ‘would have to look after the family’.

He remembers a ‘big fight’ between the Menhthe and Emmi.\(^{216}\) It was caused because one of the two missed a ceremony – and ‘didn’t pass any presents’.\(^{217}\) Later they went to the Moyle River. A boat had come into the river. A crocodile hunter called Roy Moffatt. Les joined Wagon Dumoo, Mark Dumoo, and Johnny Dumoo to go and work on the boat. The boat travelled from the Fitzmaurice River (and places like Legune Station) to Numbulwar, hunting crocodiles. This lasted 7 years.

Then they went to work on the railway. He cut ironwood and split it to make sleepers. It was then put on a wagon to go on the Darwin to Larrimah railway (or was it Frances Creek). Les worked for a year doing this work. He came back to Wadeye and worked for the mission, on the airstrip. Les says, ‘when I look at the young boys today, I am sad – it makes it hard for us old people’.

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\(^{216}\) The distinction ‘big’ in this case usually means that there were many people involved, probably with casualties and sometimes deaths.

\(^{217}\) ‘Presents’ meaning items within the *nanthi kulu* system.
Les says that becoming a ‘leader’ takes some time. He says, ‘old man Darla-Kulgar (Nemarluk’s father) and Charlie Brinken were leaders’. He says there are two words for ‘leader’ – markupil or marpindi.²¹ Les says marpindi means ‘chief of the tribe’.

He says:

‘When trouble, problems – the leader come together. They get every information, without any trouble. Young boys have to listen to the main one – the boss or chief. So then, they make the decision in certain things. They fix things up and then things stop’.

He says that they have a word for ‘government’ – murintarn. There is a word for ‘one big chief’ – it is numbunvivi. This is when ‘the government is combined into one’. They (the people) all work for him. Les says, ‘When that man talks, the people are working for him – ceremony, dancing, tucker, and corroboree’.

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Box 4F: Life History, Case Study F

**Gregory Mollingin**

Gregory Mollingin or Punbuwa (his Aboriginal name which means a type of sugar bag), was born 17 November 1938. He was born in the bush at a place called Nanung (Pearce Point). As a baby (wakul), Gregory was taken by his parents to the new mission site (established in 1938), Wadeye. His parents were the notorious Mollingin (Yek Diminin clan) and Mary

²¹ This is in the Marritjevin language.
Naiyirr (Kura Thipman clan). Gregory Mollingin is Karrthin moiety, thangari subsection, and Murrinh-patha language.

At the age of 10, Gregory was placed in the mission dormitory. He was given the identification number, 15. Gregory describes this period as being ‘a very hard time’. He says:

‘The missionaries couldn’t let you go because of school. If you missed school you got a hiding with a piece of flat timber. Brother Quinn was a cheeky one. He could make you sick. He would chase you with his horse or a little jeep. He tried to make you understand. Brother Quinn would use his fists and bust your face. It was a very, very rough hard time. But, we had to stay there … because … I don’t know. Our parents wouldn’t do anything because they were frightened of gun or rifle’.

Discipline was strict in the boy’s life of dormitory and school. Gregory told of how the toilet at the school was a half 44 gallon drum. He tells of the indignation of having to use the drum in front of the other boys in the class. He says ‘If you missed (urinating in) the drum, you would get your head pushed into the drum by the teacher, it would make you sick’.

Gregory tells the following story:

‘One day when I was out hunting, I found Brother Quinn’s bike in the bush. I took the bike back to Brother at the Presbytery. He hit me on the side of the head and knocked me down the stairs. I don’t know why he did that’.
Most young men attending school would leave about the age of 18. Gregory was asked to stay until he was 19. He particularly remembers Sister Mary Helen and says, ‘I was good to her – I didn’t answer back!’ Sister was apparently also good to him. Father Docherty wanted him to work in the timber mill but Sister Mary Helen spoke to the priest and he was allowed to stay the extra year.

When he was 18, the following incident happened:

‘One day Brother Quinn was angry and wanted to fight some of us. He loved to fight. He called out to a bunch of us and asked what we were staring at. I said you are not a missionary, so we had a fight. He got stuck into me but then I got him a good one and knocked him out like he used to do to me. He got up again so I knocked him down again. Father Leary was under the tree watching us. He saw what was happening but he didn’t get angry. He just dusted Brother Quinn down and took him away. I was worried I would get the blame. But Father Leary must have known that Brother started a lot of the trouble. Later he took Brother Quinn away and sent him to Bathurst Island. He was a fair old bloke, old Leary’.

He also told the following story:

‘Father Bailey was a cheeky bloke as well. He had to get his hiding. Leo Melpi, who was seventeen, fought him. Leo knocked him down. Bailey was drunk. Father Docherty came along. Docherty growled Bailey and sent him somewhere else. He got his lesson as well’.
Gregory also referred to the practices of some of the sisters, in particular Sister Jacinta who used to arrange for some of her pupils to stand in chains in the hot sun as a punishment. Gregory says, ‘Father Leary and Father John Morton were good priests – the rest were silly’.

When he left school, he went to work with other Kardu Diminin clan members in the mill and with the housing team. They cut cypress pine and then processed it into timber that could be used on the houses. He helped to build the church by ‘getting the stone from the ridge, carrying it by hand to the truck’.

Father Docherty left in 1958 and Father Leary took over. Gregory Mollingin left to join the RAAF in Darwin. He says that this was ‘a wonderful life … a very wonderful life’. He lived with the other RAAF workers and says, ‘there were no problems. It changed my life’. Gregory says that the reason his life was changed was because it was ‘a different job, a different place, good friends, it was a happy place, and I earnt good money’. He tells the story:

‘They paid us well. My job was at Lee Point. I worked with Corporal Bluey in No. 2 CRU (Control Reporting Unit). Everyone was fair … even the bosses. The officer, Lieutenant Peel was a good bloke. For years afterward, that officer used to send me a card for Christmas. We were good friends and we respected each other’.

Gregory worked for two years with the RAAF and then came back to Port Keats for a while. He stayed for Christmas and then, with his young wife Bernadette and a son, went back to the
RAAF. He stayed in Darwin for a year then ‘all the bosses went away and I came back to Port Keats’.

At this time, Father Leary had in operation the fishing boat the *Margaret Mary* and because Gregory was ‘strong and healthy’ he got a job on it for three months. Bob Brennan was the skipper and they travelled to places such as Bathurst and Melville Islands. Gregory came back to Port Keats and worked on the building team again. This time he says, ‘I was with two good brothers. Brother King, he was a big man and Brother Fitzgerald who was a very good old bloke’. He was asked to go to Daly River to help establish the mission there with Brother Fitzgerald. They cleared land, pulling logs and burning off. There were only about four people at Daly doing this work including Frank Artu, Tony Alliung and Frank Dumoo. There were some Ngan.gi-kurunggurr and Ngan.gi-wumeri speaking Aboriginal people camped there. The traditional owners from the area were living at Adelaide River and Tipperary.

In latter years, Gregory became a bible translator with Chester Street. He says, with pride, that many people call him (Gregory) the ‘Principal of the Murrinh-patha language’. He says that he spent years of his life on this project translating the Bible into Murrinh-patha language with the Catholic missionaries.

Gregory was asked if he was angry or bitter about what had happened in his life. He said, ‘No; there were good and bad that is all I can say’. However, he does argue ‘They didn’t look after us’ (the mission). The impression I had when he made this point was not so much that the missionaries did not *look after* the people when they were there, but he was bitter about the
fact that the missionaries left despite many of the local Aboriginal people, including Gregory, devoting their lives to the project. He says that in his old age, he ‘keeps thinking and talking about the mission days’. Gregory is 68 years of age now and in poor health. He is restricted to a wheelchair and he rarely attends community or council meetings even though he is a senior landowner. However, his authority still stands firm, particularly in group-based leadership decisions relating to the township of Wadeye. Many decisions have had to be reconsidered or have struck problems because he was not adequately consulted in the first instance.

**Enhancing Leadership Status by ‘Going Away’**

These six men are regarded as *kardu pule* or *kardu ngalander*, clan leaders. Some are also referred to as *kardu kirrmarn*, ceremonial leaders. They grew up in an era when young boys had limited choices; if they lived within the confines of the mission, they had to go to school. If not then they had to leave and go to work. It was an era, though, when there were opportunities for Aboriginal people leaving the reserve. The pastoral industry desired their skilled labour, as did other industries such as the armed forces, crocodile harvesting, the railway and other labour intensive industries.

The mission system of governance encouraged men in particular to expand their horizons and seek work outside the mission. Mission support for this may have been two-fold; firstly, it was a way of supporting individual development and, secondly, it took some of the political
pressure off the burgeoning community of Wadeye. In doing so, they were also, unwittingly, fostering an expansion of the traditional governance and leadership systems.

The analysis supports the notion that leadership has been enhanced by individuals ‘going away’ and building their skills and reputation. An individual has authority, influence and control in their own domain, which is primarily family and clan. Nevertheless, the case studies illustrate how it can extend though in an ever-expanding web depending on the attributes and desires of the individual. As the person gets older, the web can become larger, more complex, and denser. This can depend on several factors more particularly personal qualities of leadership and an empathy and ability to ‘look after’ others. Thus, nodes of leadership can develop within clans. Some of these nodes of leadership can be stronger than others in terms of reputation, access to resources and thus power.

As an example, an individual lives in the Timber Creek region. He visits the Port Keats region regularly to oversight ceremonies. He owns land there through ‘traditional’ rights and is a member of a local clan group. He has a reputation as an excellent stockman, as being a fair, honest and generous man, and a ‘big-man’ when it comes to ceremonial activities and trade negotiations. His authority and influence extends out to Kununurra and Wyndham, north through Port Keats and Daly and beyond, and south to Wave Hill and Lajamanu. His main ‘node’ may be in Timber Creek but this man has made an art form of leadership development. Gregory Mollingin told a story of how this man ‘helped’ himself and others from Port Keats who were in particular dilemmas when they were away from their country. In doing so and
using his resources to help others, he is also strengthening his own connections and node of leadership.

**Nodal and Networked Leadership**

The Port Keats leaders, evidenced by the activities of Nemarluk and the Red Band and others (as described in Chapter Three), exhibited a strong desire to enhance and expand their leadership base. This chapter has described how, when Father Docherty took the first group out to the initial settlement at Wentek Nganayi, there were Murrinh-patha leaders in that group who took them to their country. It was a group of Murrinh-patha leaders, one of whom foresaw the arrival of the Church and some of its symbols, who were keen to welcome and develop a partnership with the missionaries. Stanner (1966) also recorded at that stage and later, how leaders were constantly building relationships through ceremonial means, trade and marriage. The case studies indicate a structure of leadership that originated in kin and clan affiliations but which, through individual initiative, could be expanded beyond a particular group and area. This chapter has also illustrated in the case studies, how leadership was nodal and founded within the relevant clan group and their estate, but was linked and networked with immediate clan neighbours and beyond.

Stanner (1966: 37), when describing the Murrinh-patha articulation of their segmented society, aptly referred to it as a ‘flung fish-net’ construct. This conceptualisation also describes how the nodes of leadership link with other nodes. The web of networks, as evidenced by the case studies presented, expanded in some cases often when a person went away for work.
Depending on individual charisma, personal qualities, and intermarriage, the network could range for hundreds of kilometers.

**Summary and Conclusion**

This chapter has attempted to give a factual ethnographic account of the ‘mission days’ at Port Keats. It articulates the political landscape prior to establishment and describes some of the apprehension and at times, fear, that abounded between non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal, and Aboriginal and other Aboriginal factions at that time. It has also attempted to describe some of the perceptions of Aboriginal people that persist today, how they felt at the time and now. By investigating the events leading up to the first mission exploration and then the subsequent first settlement at Werntek Nganayi, one is able to gain some insight into the motivations of the key parties, subsequent manoeuvring and positioning, and successive outcomes.

Some accounts allude to a situation where the missionaries were the colonisers; however, the research presented here suggests that in fact the Aboriginal landowners may have been much more proactive in incorporating Christianity into the region as a strategy for ongoing positive engagement and benefit. The Murrinh-patha in particular occupied land that, in its northern reaches, had the notorious ‘Moyle River tribes’ whilst to the south there were the war-like Fitzmaurice River clans and other groups. The Murrinh-patha had relationships that on occasions were cordial and on other occasions often became quite violent, with these groups. However, further alliances, particularly one that was with non-Aboriginal interests, were no doubt a powerful asset in political terms. Their Murrinh-patha leaders were astute, well organised, and willing to adapt to change. They had demonstrated this by the attempt to
incorporate the subsectional kinship system of the south-west into their own society and the willingness to travel, both men and women, to places such as Bradshaw Station and beyond, seeking work, goods, and new experiences with the cattle pioneers.

Some of the leaders, including the Murrinh-patha and other tribal groups, could be ruthless and deadly. The numerous accounts of the murder of intruders and the legendary exploits of Murrinh-patha clansman, Nemarluk and the Red Band of Warriors, testify to this. However, their leadership through their networks and communication links to surrounding regions had also possibly sensed forthcoming changes. The cattle barons were becoming annoyed by the killing of cattle and wanted better law and order in the broader region. More police patrols were moving in and police stations were established at Pine Creek, Daly River and Timber Creek. The Port Keats Aboriginal peoples’ appetite for goods such as tobacco, sugar and flour had been whetted; it was time perhaps to welcome, negotiate, compromise and then incorporate a ‘new way’ of doing business. Indeed, as described in this chapter, many of the prominent senior regional clan leaders were already in Fannie Bay Gaol.

One of the prominent elders, Mollingin, had a fortuitous vision of a new God arriving. He and his clan and affiliated leaders sensed this prophecy as an opportunity to strengthen their own political position before others in the region. It was also a strategic opportunity to incorporate the new religion into their own. The prophecy paved the way for the assimilation of new religious concepts into their existing cosmology and the establishment of new power relationships. The best ‘new way’ around at the time (keeping in mind these were Depression years) was the Catholic Church and they grasped it with both hands.
A partnership then ensued for a number of years. There was a fair bit of give and take. Even though some of the missionaries were hard, even perceived to be cruel, the Murrinh-patha let them, in most instances have their way and stay on their land. When the missionaries sought the presence of other tribal groups on their land, the Murrinh-patha tolerated this even though it would have been unacceptable in the past. They accepted, in fact gave willingly to the missionaries, their most priceless possessions, namely their children; boys and girls to be educated in a way that could be confronting to their own religious practices. Their children were priceless, because up to this stage, girls through marriage could facilitate the establishment of new alliances, strengthen others, and open further economic opportunity and resources. Boys, because they were the future warriors, protectors and leaders of the clan were potentially the up and coming leaders. This gesture ensured that they were generally recognised by the missionaries as the Aboriginal ‘bosses’ of the area, received some favours, and could enjoy some of the luxury goods (tobacco, sugar, flour and the like) that had so eagerly been sought previously.

Some things such as certain ceremonies, which the missionaries either regarded as pagan or impacting too much on the community, had to be conducted in secret or ceased; some country was purposely not visited or nurtured properly in order to appease the new order. However, generally life for them was now relatively secure. They were even able to participate in one of their most favoured activities, ‘going away’ to other country to experience new things (such as mustering cattle).
The case studies demonstrate the resilience of the leaders and their ability to adapt as individuals; it also demonstrates the sustainability of the overall leadership system based on nodal, networked governance foundations. The case studies also illustrate how leaders concentrated leadership amongst a few, consulted with others where appropriate, and continuously sought and maintained profitable social and economic alliances with other leaders and groups.

This chapter has detailed the considerable change that occurred in Indigenous social existence during the era variously described as the ‘mission days’, ‘cattle time’, the war, and the period when there was an ability for Indigenous people to ‘go away’ to seek work and life-experiences. Whilst Wadeye might be described as an Indigenous ‘domain’ (von Sturmer 1984: 219), it also became a launching pad for the extension of networks and fortification of leadership nodality, through relationships to other places and with other people, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal.

This was reinforced for me at Timber Creek in 2005 when a long-term non-Aboriginal station manager and my elderly Aboriginal colleague from Wadeye warmly embraced each other, the manager saying, ‘This man was my right hand man. We worked together droving cattle right across this country. We looked after each other. He taught me country and I taught him cattle’. Such encounters during these, albeit ‘hard’ times, fostered intercultural fields of intimate engagement (Merlan 1998; Martin 2003; Holcombe 2004) that were often interspersed with respect and admiration. Further, Indigenous people, were able to maintain affairs in their own domain, whilst engaging and manoeuvring in the intercultural. Socio-political networks were
cultivated by astute Aboriginal leaders that often further enhanced their position and standing way beyond their own communities and country. They developed wider regional social and political networks that linked them and their kinfolk to other people and socio-political, economic and religious experiences and responsibility.

However, outside influences were later to change things again. The prominence and authority of the mission in the wider world of politics began to wane. The demise of work for Aboriginal people outside of the region, and the influx of unemployment benefits were to place the leaders under pressure again and force them to take another turn in their lives. The parents of middle-aged and elderly people of today had welcomed and worked with the missionaries. Those present today, particularly the younger generation, often speculate at what cost such adjustment came. Nevertheless, they have had to deal with it, in most cases, and move on, their leadership trying to cope with the waves of change that continued to ebb and flow across the region. This leads to the next era of leadership; the ‘middle-aged’.

219 Whilst these considerations are of major importance in the context of this thesis, it is also appropriate to pay respect to the missionaries, many of whom devoted their lives to the local people. The late Father Docherty, interred today in the church at Wadeye, gave until he could give no more. Father Leary, highly regarded by locals, was still active in Darwin up until his recent death at age 86. Brother Pye is still alive at age 102. Sister Magdalen, still resident at Wadeye, reads stories regularly to children at the school. The strength, commitment, fortitude, practicality and skill of many of these people and their attempts to make a difference are legendary and still regularly recalled.
Chapter Five

‘Middle-aged’ Male Leadership in the Port Keats Region

In the previous chapter, I presented an overview of how elderly Indigenous men from the Port Keats area lived their lives and negotiated a co-existence and working relationship with non-Indigenous visitors and later occupiers of their country. This chapter is about the leadership provided by middle-aged men from the 1970s onwards.

In the chapter about the elderly male leadership, I considered the impact that government and religious policy had on facilitating and supporting ongoing engagement from the mid-1930s onwards. This activity set a template for further policy development, implementation and interventions in following years. This chapter examines policy development in years following, why it occurred and more importantly for this thesis, the significant impact it had on Indigenous leadership patterns. In ethnographic accounts, this chapter also documents how such initiatives were interpreted, and how Indigenous people transformed their leadership, authority and power structures in order to continue meaningful relationships.
Indigenous Australians have long been an issue for Australian governments. Initial engagements were often characterised by violence, hostility and killings. Some agencies such as the Police practised what were undoubtedly forms of ‘extermination’ and in the Northern Territory there were many violent incidents that were instigated under the policy of ‘dispersal’. Some of the later government policies and dictums to address the perceived problem have included ‘protectionism’, ‘institutionalisation’, ‘assimilation’, and ‘integration’.

From about 1972, new government policies referred to as ‘self-determination’ and ‘self-management’ were introduced. Whilst these initiatives were designed to herald a new era of human rights, they often created confusion and misunderstanding. Older leaders who had adapted and worked with a paternalistic governance system for most of their lives were at odds over how to co-opt a community-based self-determination policy into their own ‘traditional’ governance that was fundamentally egalitarian, group based, and founded on principles of landownership. A fundamental adaptation of Aboriginal senior leaders at Port Keats to such policy implementation was to delegate certain authority and decision making to ‘mainstream educated’ middle-aged leaders.

Such delegation was strategic and fortunate because further policy initiatives referred to as ‘community development’, ‘Aboriginalisation’, ‘reconciliation’, ‘self-empowerment’, and ‘practical reconciliation’ were also to be later tested in Indigenous affairs and increasingly drew upon such middle-aged educated leaders. More recently, the conservative Australian Liberal Government espoused a policy of ‘shared responsibility’ based on ‘mutual obligations’ that for some communities with ‘entrenched problems’ was deemed to require ‘intensive
intervention’ (OIPC 2006). This has led Colin Tatz (2001: 6) to comment that not only have Indigenous people been one of ‘the most conquered peoples in Western history’ but also the ‘most over-administered peoples in the world’. Over-administration has associated complexities in governance conceptualisation and the middle-aged leaders were often better equipped to understand and work with the new regimes.

The Impact of Government Policies on Indigenous Leadership

The middle-aged Port Keats men of today inherited a new era in Indigenous affairs from the 1970s onwards. The Whitlam Government, when it came to power in 1972, introduced a major policy initiative of Indigenous ‘self-determination’ that laid the path for increased Indigenous involvement in decision-making. However, prior to its introduction, certain economic changes in remote parts of Australia and government policy responses had already begun to influence the development of a new era that would change the social environment of Indigenous people in the bush forever. The changes are outlined below.

Award Wages

Following various investigations of mistreatment and poor Aboriginal conditions on pastoral stations, it was determined in 1947 that stipulated wages would be paid for Aboriginal people working in the pastoral industry. Improvements were also to be made in accommodation, medical conditions, and general living conditions. There was mention of an Aboriginal Pastoral Award, however, it did not eventuate until 1965, when the Commonwealth

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Conciliation and Arbitration Commission decreed that by 1 December 1968, all Aboriginal employees would be covered by awards (Rowley 1971; Stevens 1974). By 1967, some pastoralists announced they were now only going to employ non-Aboriginal labour. Other stations significantly downsized their Aboriginal workforce.

The introduction of the Pastoral Award brought many changes. Significantly, for a period during the 1970s and again in the 1980s, the beef market crashed with many stations going into a ‘holding’ mode with only skeleton staff. On some stations, Aboriginal people were requested to leave because a wage economy limited, or supposedly limited, the number of workers. The pastoral industry from the 1970s onwards also commenced innovative labour-saving practices including helicopter mustering. Contractors were now being used instead of a permanent work force. Leading hands became required to plan road train loadings by formula. It became trendy for well-educated non-Aboriginal youth to work a few years ‘on the land in the Australian bush’. The days when the pastoral industry relied on Aboriginal labour were rapidly changing.

For most of the Port Keats people, their days in the pastoral industry were over. Some who had worked at Auvergne, Bradshaw and other stations decided, after a period of inactivity at Wadeye, that they wanted to establish a cattle station on their own country. With the help of the Catholic Church, they established Palumpa Station. However, the outcome of all this

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221 The Award was precipitated through the Wave Hill Gurindji Strike of 1966–67, to some degree by the Gove dispute in northeastern Arnhem Land in 1963, and actions taken in other quarters such as Newcastle Waters, Helen Springs, and Banka Banka (McLaren and Cooper 2001: 171–172).

222 Palumpa Station has since developed as a successful Indigenous-owned pastoral enterprise. A community of about 400 people is part of the development.
was that most Aboriginal people from Port Keats would never work in the pastoral industry again.

**Jobs and Welfare**

The policy of ‘assimilation’, defined in 1961 by the Federal Government, stipulated that Aboriginal people were to reach a situation where they were able to ‘attain the same manner of living as other Australians and to live as members of a single Australian community enjoying the same rights and privileges, accepting the same responsibilities, observing the same customs and influenced by the beliefs, hopes and loyalties as other Australians’.  The move toward assimilation was synonymous with the advent of ‘welfarism’ in Aboriginal affairs (Altman and Sanders 1991: 2). However, those in the Aboriginal welfare system were generally excluded in a legal sense from the Australian welfare system (Altman and Sanders 1991: 2). This included exclusion from the Australian social security legislation and benefits (Altman and Sanders 1991: 2).

During the 1940s, the child endowment allowance was deemed to be payable in respect of all Aboriginal children, except the ‘nomadic’.  However, it was not until 1959, before pension and benefit eligibility was extended to include all Aborigines except the ‘nomadic and primitive’.  This last qualification was removed in 1966.  Even then, until the late 1970s welfare payments for some Indigenous people, especially those on reserve lands, were made to

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224 Commonwealth Acts No 8 of 1941 and No 5 of 1942.
225 Act No 57 of 1959.
226 Act No 41 of 1966.
the third parties on their behalf. In the case of Port Keats, almost all such payments were passed on to the Catholic Mission with the concurrence of the Commonwealth Government’s Northern Territory Aboriginal Welfare Branch.

The Catholic Church through this mechanism, and the associated ‘cash-cow’ of welfare payments, was able to maintain a strong presence in the Port Keats region into the 1970s. The Catholic Mission Headquarters in Darwin maintained an influential administration centre servicing the communities of Wadeye, Nguiu, Daly River and Santa Teresa, seemingly flushed with funds. The funds accumulated from these social security payments, special purpose grants and education subsidies from the Federal Government. However, the Whitlam Government in 1973 signalled winds of change. They were determined to ‘restore to Aborigines their lost power to determine their own futures’ (Altman and Sanders 1991: 5). The Catholic Church did not go down without a fight; they were still fiercely arguing the need for their presence, and their funding, in the mid to late 1970s.\(^{227}\)

The initial reaction to unemployment payments or ‘sit-down money’ by some elders was one of anger. Father John Leary (see Fr. J. Leary cited in McCormack 2006) recalls a Murrinh-patha leader, who was a bush carpenter at Wadeye, being very upset when he received his first payment:

[He] was very perceptive and a thinker. He called a public meeting. Waving his wage packet he announced … in [Murrinh-patha]:: ‘This is

\(^{227}\) In 1977, one still had to seek ‘approval’ from Mission Headquarters to visit the community.
a new way to live. It is not my old way. My old way is living in the
bush, teaching my children how to live there. That is me. This new
way is not me. What if I leave my old way and join the new way? I
will end up [makardu].

From the start, Indigenous people seemed to sense the impact that such payments would have
on their people. Today, the concept of welfare-type payments are expected, and seen as a
right, but also perceived to be ‘white-man’s money’ that is paid to ‘look after black-fellas’.
The concept of unemployment benefits is well ingrained into cultural discourse and is known
as ku mulun (McCormack 2006: pers. com). Some elderly and middle-aged people see such
money as a ‘curse’ on their community, preventing them from extracting themselves from a
life of poverty.

By 1994, approximately 55 per cent of Indigenous Australians stated that they received some
form of welfare payment compared to the mainstream rate of 12 per cent (Smith 2001: 54).
Social security money has virtually become the sole source of income for many Indigenous
people across the country. At Port Keats, 82 per cent of total Aboriginal income at Port Keats
can now be attributed to welfare non-employment payments (Taylor 2004: 57).

\footnote{Makardu means, ‘quite literally, a non-person; a nobody’ (McCormack 2006: 5).}
The township of Wadeye was not established with an economic base, nor has it subsequently acquired one, at least not in a manner that is currently sustainable beyond the provisions of the welfare state (Taylor 2004: 39). Whilst the labour force has grown in size, Aboriginal labour force participation has declined (Taylor 2004: 39). The Aboriginal working age population continues to grow but the number of available jobs cannot keep pace (Taylor 2004: 39). In 2003, Taylor (2004: 41) calculated that only 16.1 per cent of residents had jobs. He estimates that by 2023, the resident Aboriginal population of working age, will almost double (Taylor 2004: 52). Whilst in the days of the pastoral movement and the military, people went away from the community to work, this option is no longer available.

**Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP)**

The CDEP scheme evolved as a response to the increasing payment of unemployment benefits in ‘remote’ Aboriginal communities’ with few formal labour market employment opportunities (Morphy and Sanders 2001: 1). The payment of unemployment benefits was seen by some as inappropriate to the situation, so Commonwealth Aboriginal affairs administration made payments, rather than the social security administration. The payments were roughly equivalent to unemployment benefits and were designed to employ members on a part-time basis. The scheme commenced at 12 remote communities in 1977.

A report on the social security system (McLure 2000) emphasised the importance of paid employment. The welfare reform agenda outlined in the report emphasised the notion of ‘mutual obligation’ and this was part of the previous Liberal Government’s policy platform for
Indigenous Australians. In fact, through the CDEP program, Indigenous people have been engaged in a mutual obligation type arrangement for the past 20 years (Altman et al 2005: vii). A review of CDEP conducted by Altman and others (2005) found that on available evidence, the program should continue to be supported as it has ‘positive economic and community development impacts and that it is cost effective in achieving these outcomes’ (Altman et al 2005: vi). There are about 5,000 Indigenous participants in CDEP schemes in the NT today with a total contract value of more than $50 million per year. The current Labour Government has announced that they are reviewing the CDEP Program. The legacy of these policy initiatives, whilst impacting on all Aboriginal people at Port Keats in some respect, is particularly borne by the middle-aged.

**Who are the ‘Middle-Aged’ Leaders of Port Keats?**

Being ‘middle-aged’ at Port Keats must be considered relative to the median age at death in the region of 46 years. An Aboriginal man commences his ‘middle-aged passage’ in his early thirties according to the mind-set of local Port Keats residents (Ivory 2006). Thus middle-aged males are classified, for this exercise at Port Keats, as those born from the 1950s onwards or broadly those aged about 35 to 55 years. They are generally referred to as *kardu*.

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230 Participants at Port Keats have to work thirty two hours per fortnight to receive a full payment. The payment (in 2008) is $426 per fortnight for a single person as opposed to $406 per fortnight for unemployment benefits. An Australian Council of Social Service analysis of social security payments and Henderson Poverty Lines in 2001 calculated that such payments situated recipients 21% below the poverty line. The cost of living, on average is about 40% higher at Wadeye than in the nearest capital city, Darwin, thus further entrenching residents in a beleaguered position.
231 Taylor and Stanley (2005: 22): ‘46 years for Aboriginal people in the Daly SLA’. This equates to being 18% higher than that calculated for Aboriginal people in the NT as a whole or 4 times that of the non-Aboriginal population.
Table 5A illustrates the location of the ‘middle-aged’ in the clan-based leadership structure today.\(^\text{232}\)

**Table 5A: Ages of Clan Leaders from the Port Keats Region\(^\text{233}\)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of Clan</th>
<th>Ages of Primary Leaders</th>
<th>Average Age</th>
<th>Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Angeleni</td>
<td>53, 53, 49, 46</td>
<td>50</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kirmmu</td>
<td>62, 54, 51, 51</td>
<td>55</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kubiyirr</td>
<td>62, 57, 51, 44</td>
<td>54</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kulingmirr</td>
<td>57, 56, 55, 48*</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>* This person is a woman who was named by the men as part of the leadership group.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kungarbarl</td>
<td>55, 52, 51, 50</td>
<td>52</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kuy</td>
<td>81, 47, 42</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Merrepen</td>
<td>43*, 42, 27, 27</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>*Female within leadership group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nadirri</td>
<td>73, 61, 59, 58, 52*, 46</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>* Female leader</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nemarluk</td>
<td>59, 56, 25</td>
<td>47</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nganthawudi</td>
<td>54, 53, 52, 46</td>
<td>51</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nuthunhu</td>
<td>67, 63, 62, 27</td>
<td>55</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perrederr</td>
<td>70, 68, 64, 53</td>
<td>64</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thinti</td>
<td>69, 53, 39</td>
<td>54</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wudipuli</td>
<td>62, 58, 54, 49</td>
<td>56</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diminin</td>
<td>72, 70, 69, 67, 63</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>Interestingly, <em>Diminin</em> and <em>Maninh</em>, with higher ages of leadership, are closest to the town of</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^{232}\) Bern (1974: 170) also analysed the role of middle-aged leaders. Following research at Ngukurr, he argued that not only were ‘middle-aged family heads’ providing ‘town’ leadership, they were also prominent in ritual and ‘land related matters’.

\(^{233}\) These ages were calculated in 2008.
Some of the middle-aged leaders (those in their 50s) were born in the era when the Catholic dormitory system was still operating. Others, who were born later, experienced Catholic education either at Wadeye, or in Darwin or in other places within Australia. They can read and write, some having studied to Year 12 standards. Many are articulate enough to operate in public forums involving non-Aboriginal groups.

Not only have they had a reasonable western education, they also have had considerable exposure and education within local cultural systems. Due to their ability to operate in most intercultural forums, they have acquired certain respect and status from the older leaders. They are referred to as kardu pule, senior males, and there are usually only a few men in each clan more senior to them.

Often these men are well-travelled; many having been to Darwin or interstate for schooling, or in latter years in their roles within the community. They are often multi-lingual in Aboriginal languages as well as very fluent in English. Most are able to comment on local, state and national politics and trends. They are particularly aware of the dynamics of Indigenous politics.

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234 This table was developed in Feb. 2008. Since then a number of senior men have passed away, and there has been further transition of younger people into the leadership structure.
and the need to refer and seek endorsement from senior elders. Occasionally they also defer on
certain issues to more senior men. On one occasion at the public signing of a major gas-line
agreement, a middle-aged leader made a decision to withdraw from the signing and
summoned all of the remainder of the clan to join him. A more senior elder, who rarely
questioned such decisions by the middle-aged leader in forums of this type, whilst not openly
overruling the middle-aged leader, said that he would go ahead with the signing. The other
clan members very quickly rallied to the side of the older man. The middle-aged man, whilst
vocariously challenging this move in the public forum, in a strategic fashion, later readjusted
his position within a few hours to reflect the older clan leader’s decision.

Often these middle-aged men, even though they come from different clans and language
groups, were sent away for school and have shared skills, knowledges and experiences. Hence
they share backgrounds, friendships and alliances that they often utilise as leadership aids.
Such alliances enable them to strategise and plan tactics prior to decisions being finalised by
more senior leaders.

In order to examine how this age-grouping contributes to the leadership process at Port Keats,
case studies of three middle-aged leaders will be considered. These case studies reflect the
skills, knowledge and experiences atypical of this particular age grouping of leaders.
Box 5A:  Life History, Case Study G

Tobias Nganbe

Tobias Nganbe was born at the Wadeye mission hospital in 1957. His father was Charlie Roche Nganbe, an elder of the Rak Kirmu clan, Murrinh-patha language. His mother was Kulkut of the Rak Kuy/Yek Naning clan, Magati-ge language.

Tobias lived in the mission dormitory for ‘about 6 or 7 years’. Tobias says, ‘my number (identity) was 42’. On the weekends, he was allowed home to stay with his family. The priests in charge at the time were Father O’Brian and Father Hyland. Tobias remembers these days as being ‘good fun – especially being with my friends in that age group’. The ‘age-group’ was made up of young men from all of the various tribes ‘mixed up’. He says, ‘we still stick together at Peppi (in social situations)’.

Tobias underwent thempith (initiation) in Darwin Hospital. In 1978, he commenced his ceremonial introduction into the ritual of Punh. The ceremony took place at Yelcherr. Other men being initiated were from his dormitory group and they went through at the same time (Leon Melpi, Timothy Dumoo, Gordon Chula and others). He says, ‘The old men really gave us a lesson. They made us sit down and talk things over’.

Tobias describes a major ‘turning point’ in his life. This was in 1970 when he visited Brisbane, Kingaroy, Downlands College and other places. He says:

235 Yelcherr is the site where a major gas pipeline will come onshore. It is scheduled for completion in 2009 and will supply Darwin.
‘We saw how other people live. It was the first time we had seen a big city. We were very well looked after and respected by strangers. I started to realise that there are people out there that don’t care where you come from’.

Tobias attended Monavale College in Victoria during the period 1971–73. He went to Year 12. He remembers it as ‘good fun’ particularly when mixing with boys from Nauru and Central Australia. He says, ‘I got to know a lot of people’. However, he says that he saw racism – not so much directed at him, but by Monavale students toward other Indigenous students from other colleges. Such students were called such names as ‘the blackies’. After observing this, Tobias said that it actually made him more resolute – ‘So now I can take anything’.

Tobias says that his father said to him as a young boy ‘One day you will take my place (as a leader) for Rak Kirnmu clan’. His father also said, ‘I want you to go down south to study. It’s better that way’. Tobias says ‘But I missed a lot of stuff (culture)’. In 1983 his father died. Tobias says about his father ‘In Council meetings, he was strong but he would also let other people have their say’. His father would often clash with the Diminin leaders.

Reflecting on where he is today as Co-Principal of the Thamarrurr School and an influential spokesperson, he says, ‘If we hadn’t been made to speak English at school – I would never have gone on to matriculation’. He argues ‘This is important – you have to be able to speak English whether you like it or not’.
JK

J grew up at Nama near Wudipuli. He is aged 37 and has six children. His oldest child is aged 17. J went to school for a while at St Johns Boarding College in Darwin. During this time, he recalls he had a fight and decided to come back to Wadeye. His friends (from Wadeye) that were with him also got homesick so they stole some bikes from the college. They rode to Daly River a distance of about 180 kilometres, surviving on lollies, and then walked sixty kilometers to Palumpa Station. They got a lift from Palumpa to Wadeye with the local police officer.

J’s first job was with the Council’s parks and gardens team at Wadeye. He was interested in doing some training but there was nothing available at the time. Subsequently he worked as a teacher’s aide, interpreter, hygiene officer and currently as a plumber. He enjoyed working as a teacher’s aide, particularly with a teacher called E – they worked a lot with ‘the gang boys’. E left the community but still corresponds with J.

In more recent times, J has been focused on his job as a plumber. During this time he met plumbers called G and A, went to Sydney with them, and worked there for 6 weeks. J says that he ‘loved it down south’. He recalls working hard and particularly the social aspect of, at the end of the day, drinking with his non-Aboriginal friends at the pub. He says that some people would say that it was the ‘first time I have met a black person’.
As a plumber, he is undertaking an apprentice’s course. He hopes in the future to be able to work in Darwin for a while to learn about hot water systems. J has problems in some areas such as mathematics. He often tries to use the tape measure, but he says his understanding is limited.

J says that the ceremonies, in terms of discipline are not working because parents ‘don’t keep an eye on their kids properly’. He says because parents are drinking they are not aware of what their children are doing. Hence, some kids are sniffing petrol and they come from all of the language groups. J talks about ‘making the level’ and ‘bringing kids up’ to their elder’s level. Otherwise, they will only smoke ‘gunja’ (marijuana) and sleep.

J says that his father told him several things when he was young. He said ‘My father told me to respect people and talk to people. He told me I have to work because you do not know what is coming up in the future. Do not give up your work, even when new white people come to replace others’.

Box 5C: Life History, Case Study I

Matthias Nemarluk

Matthias Nemarluk was born in the mission hospital at Wadeye. His language is Marri Amu. His clan country is known as Rak Thinti which is adjoined by the clan estates of Rak Angileni to the south west and Rak Nganthawudi to the north. All of these groups historically have been
subject to dislocation and movement. Most of the people from the general area now reside predominantly at Wadeye, Darwin or Belyuen. Many move in a cycle that involves all three centres enabling them to visit and engage with kin and country. Their estates, located near the coast, are relatively isolated with only basic road access and services thus making visitation during the monsoonal season very difficult.

Matthias is well educated and has an extensive background in health work. He has worked in mainstream health and also as a traditional practitioner particularly relating to intitation and circumcision.236 He is a confident and knowledgable speaker, often representing his own people and the wider community in meetings with government and other officials. Men and women of his clan regard him as being wise and tactful, with a level head when issues become contentious and potentially violent.

Matthias has an acute ability to interact with people from wide cultural backgrounds. On one occasion in Canberra, after a long day of meetings and government interaction, Matthias and others from the middle-aged ‘set’ accompanied the author to a local hotel. Within minutes he had introduced himself to several local non-Aboriginal regulars and joined their ‘shout’ discussing everything from national politics to football.

The leader of the clan, Rak Angileni, is relatively elderly with a poor knowledge of English. He delegates the responsibility to ‘talk for’ most matters pertaining to the estate to Matthias. However, such matters do not extend to decisions and authority relating to religious or

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236 He is often referred to as a ‘doctor’ of bush culture and medicine.
ceremonial type issues. Similarly, on the estate nearby known as *Rak Nghanthawudi*,\(^{237}\) the most senior man, David Timber, also delegates general decision-making or the responsibility to ‘look after’ affairs to Matthias.\(^{238}\) Matthias defers to this man on matters pertaining to land issues such as mining exploration. Matthias in a sense, ‘manages’ their country on their behalf. With such management responsibility comes associated additional authority and also status.

\(^{237}\) The language of those people from *Rak Nghanthawudi* is Menhthe (a dialect of Emmi/Merranunggu).

\(^{238}\) David Timber resides at One Mile Dam camp in Darwin. Whilst retaining an interest in his people and country, he did not during the four years of my research visit the estate. He is referred to as being one of the most senior men in this area north of the Moyle River.
The case-studies reflect common experiences of the middle-aged men. They are all relatively well-educated, have generally had positive experiences outside of Port Keats, at the same time maintain good knowledge of customary practice. They have undergone satisfactory initiation procedures, attend ceremony but often not as principal actors, and are able to organise events.
and happenings with a complex and often difficult non-Indigenous quarter.\textsuperscript{239} They are able to engage in a multitude of domains, are adept at public speaking, and confident without being presumptuous toward their peers. They are able to operate in the the political realm with non-Indigenous leaders.

All three of these men were in their early years when the significant economic changes mentioned earlier occurred in the region. It was during their early years that Church and government policy once again impacted on the region. The first policy change was the rapid withdrawal of the Church and locally-based government welfare officers during the 1970s coupled with the establishment of locally governed council structures. The next section documents how such structures were established and their outcomes.

**Changing Governance and Leadership**

Political changes on the Australian landscape have always, in some way, affected Indigenous culture and society. Perhaps the most significant, at least for the Port Keats people, began to occur in the early 1970s. This next section explores such changes and how they influenced leadership in the region.

**‘Community’ Governance**

A major outcome of the self determination era was the encouragement, often forced, for local councils and local governing bodies to be formed. Most of the mission authorities, suspicious

\textsuperscript{239} ‘Satisfactory’ in terms of being recognised throughout the region and beyond (for example Western Australia) as having undertaken certain levels of ceremonial indoctrination.
of government intrusion, were not keen to move in this direction, however in 1978, Wadeye took its first tentative step to incorporate such a body.

**Kardu Numida Council**

A local council, Kardu Numida Inc., was established in 1978 (Desmarchelier 2005: 7). It was to provide local government-type services and was intended to ‘provide a stable and legal authority’ that could access various resources. It was established through the *Associations Incorporation Act (NT)* 1963; legislation that was originally intended for ‘football clubs and bingo groups’ (Read 1978: pers. com). The primary proponent for the establishment of the association was the Commonwealth Department of Aboriginal Affairs. Membership of this association was to be all Aboriginal persons residing at Wadeye and on ‘Murinbata Tribal Land’ and such other persons who are deemed to be ‘Elders of the Aboriginal Community’.  

A group of people governed the association and they had ‘the power to do all legal matters’.

Although the NT and Commonwealth Governments recognised the entity, it was often ‘not seen to be the valid decision making structure in the eyes of local Aboriginal people’ (Desmarchelier 2005: 8). It was not ‘valid’, I was told in 2007 by some of the clan leaders, because of domination over time by certain clan groups, and individuals, who were supported by the administration regime of the day.

The electoral process of Kardu Numida Inc. required annual elections, with fifteen people to be nominated from family groups belonging to three wider cultural groups (*Dhanba, Wangga,*...
and Lirrga). The land-owners for Wadeye were only from the Dhanba group. The President and Vice-President were to be elected from the elected councillors with one other being a traditional owner of the community.  

According to Desmarchelier (2005: 8), nomination and election to all positions was ‘by common acclamation, usually on a show of hands’.

The Collapse of Kardu Numida Council

Kardu Numida Council operated for sixteen years, then in 1994 the Council began to experience serious credibility and participation difficulties. The only people who were nominating for positions were those who belonged to the local land-owning group, the Kardu Diminin. The situation had progressively grown worse. Desmarchelier (2005: 9) maintains that this was because individuals from other groups could not legitimately participate in decisions that concerned matters related to Kardu Diminin land, on which the township was built. They were regarded as ‘visitors’, as would the Diminin if they came on to their land. Whilst the association was legitimate in the eyes of Western governments, it was not relevant in the eyes of the Port Keats Aboriginal people.

Coupled with these cultural relevancy issues was another situation that was to lead to serious financial and administrative problems. The Council was resourced at a level that was originally meant to service a population of 600 people. By 1994 the population had doubled without recognition and neither the personnel nor financial resources could cope. This situation had emerged and had been exacerbated by the expectations of government to provide services and the expectations of local people, who for many years had been used to a range of

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242 See Kardu Numida Association Constitution: sec. 10.
services, and support delivered by the Catholic mission. Soon after, the Council’s governance, financial, and administration capabilities collapsed. The Kardu Numida Council had overspent by approximately $1m.

A further crisis emerged during 1994-98 related to health. The organisation, Kardu Numida Inc., performed not only local government services, but arguably those that were the responsibility of the Commonwealth and Territory Government as well. These included health services, social security, and essential services, such as the supply of power, water and sewerage.

The original ‘hospital’ had been constructed by missionaries many years previously and was condemned. The government allocated $500,000 for the construction of a new clinic, however, this amount was insufficient. Subsequently, in 1994 Kardu Numida raised $260,000 from within the community to complete the building. Kardu Numida also had to contribute to the funding shortfall in order to run the facility.

When Kardu Numida supposedly experienced difficulties, the Territory Health Department decided to restrict the delivery of health and other essential services in the community and froze funding. The community had no choice but to hand back the clinic to the Northern Territory Health Department in March 1996. Terry Bullemor (cited in McQuillan 1998: 1) commented that `there was soon an obvious decline in management ability resulting in a high turnover of staff and four different managers'.

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The situation rapidly declined and McQuillan (1998: 1) describes the crisis as follows:

On the night of 8 December 1997, two nurses were in the emergency ward of the Port Keats health clinic attending a critically ill child. The distraught nephew of the child got into the ambulance and smashed the windows. The nurses phoned for alternative transport and drove the child to the nearby airstrip to be flown to Darwin for emergency treatment. All five nurses at Port Keats decided to withdraw from the township, refusing to live there. From Darwin they were flown in and out of Port Keats on the same three days a week. On 30 December 1997, acting Health Minister, Daryl Manzie, announced that this service would be halted, and closed the Port Keats health clinic.

The clinic remained closed except for emergency services for some time. The community meanwhile had been discussing a concept they referred to as *melmelmel*, which was a traditional form of conflict resolution and reconciliation (Desmarchelier 2005). Associated with aspirations to strengthen and re-negotiate their own governance structure, was a desire to reengage and renegotiate the relationship with the government and wider society.

The people also had grave concerns about the negative image of the community being portrayed in the media. Health Minister Denis Burke was invited to meet with senior leaders to discuss health services and to witness the performance of a ceremony known as *mulunu*. *Mulunu*, a traditional smoking ceremony, is more commonly performed in association with
funeral practices, but in this case was performed to recognise the seriousness of the situation and the hurt that had been felt by the community. It also represented a ‘burying’ of the differences between the community and the government.

Burke visited Wadeye on 3 February 1998 with a number of government officials. One senior advisor and later a minister in the Territory government himself, Stephen Dunham, commented that it was one of the most ‘significant’ and ‘moving’ moments he had witnessed (Dunham 2004: pers. com). McQuillan (1998: 1) reports:

Newspaper reports about Port Keats and the ashes were buried and tramped into the ground under the feet of the dancers. Local young offenders were temporarily released from Berrimah Jail and the Don Dale Detention Centre in Darwin and flown under escort to Port Keats. They participated in the smoking ceremony under the instruction of community elders. The people of Port Keats hope that this will mark the end of sensational, ill-informed and inaccurate media coverage of the community. In discussions with Health Minister Burke, community representatives reiterated their grave concerns about the totally inadequate level of technical medical support and proposed some solutions.
The Development of Thamarrurr Council

Interestingly, Desmarchelier (2000: 42) reports that the response of the Commonwealth and NT governments to the financial crisis of the 1990s was to appoint grant controllers and that ‘neither level of government offered financial support or assistance to develop more appropriate administrative or financial structures’. Further, he writes that the response of the people was ‘shame’ or embarrassment and a feeling that they were not trusted. Nevertheless, they argued that they ‘have a way’ to alleviate the situation and move forward (Desmarchelier 2000: 43).

A deliberate move was subsequently made by the Yek Diminin clan leaders, in conjunction with other clan leaders, to correct the governance imbalance. Commencing in 1996, they began to develop a governance structure founded on a culturally-based model of resolution and power balance, referred to in the Murrinh-patha language as Thamarrurr. This model effectively recognises the relationships between individuals, groups and clans. Thamarrurr, from a local perspective, is articulated as follows:

It is our way of working together, co-operating with each other, and it is also the basis of our governance system.

In the early days we looked after our families, our clans and our people through Thamarrurr. We arranged ceremonies, marriages, sorted out tribal disputes and many other things.

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243 Aboriginal people in the NT sometimes use the word ‘shame’ to describe a feeling of embarrassment or inadequacy in a particular situation.
Formal recognition of the clan as a primary node of authority and the notion of the Thamarrurr model, in some of its forms, was formally transposed into the NT local government system in 2003. The people of the Port Keats region perceived this as a major opportunity for repositioning of the traditional authority structure with contemporary Australian governance. The leaders envisaged that by aligning their governance system they would be able to engage more effectively with wider Australia and move forward. It was seen as the foundation for dealing with social, political and economic issues that had emerged as the dominant culture further influenced and changed the culture of the region. It was also seen as a major opportunity to recognise the clan-based leadership system of the region.

Moves to incorporate aspects of the Thamarrurr philosophy into a mainstream recognised local governance structure began in 1997, and finally were realised in 2003. The Thamarrurr Regional Council operated until 2008.

Toward the end of my field research, the NT government announced that Thamarrurr Council would be replaced by a new shire council on 1 July 2008. The Government, declaring that it was frustrated at the level of ‘dysfunction’ (Ah Kit 2002: 2) on communities, announced through their Minister for Local Government, Elliot McAdam, in November 2006, a new
policy of mandatory regionalised amalgamated local government that he argued would provide better basic services and be economically sustainable.\textsuperscript{244}

The new shire council is modelled on contemporary local government schemes used in other parts of Australia, and bears little resemblance to the \textit{Thamarrurr} model. The leaders, having to readjust their quest for positive engagement once again, have reportedly now focused their attention on restructuring the \textit{Thamarrurr} model to be the economic development body for the region, whilst also tacitly accepting the new local government regime.

In more recent times, despite such efforts by the leadership to engage, the physical and environmental circumstances of Aboriginal people living in places like Wadeye have become worse (Taylor 2004). Statistics relating to health, education, employment, housing, and law and order in Indigenous communities during the past decade have increasingly focused political and moral pressure on the Federal, State and Territory governments to take action. Pressured by public opinion to be proactive, and seeking political solutions, the Territory Government and the Federal Government in 2006 began to move toward policies of ‘practical’ intervention aimed at fixing the problem.

The Federal Government from mid-2006 had begun to make moves at Wadeye to intervene in community affairs. They were keen, through the Indigenous Affairs Minister, Mal Brough, to effect practical changes in terms of law and order, housing, and individual behaviour. With an election looming late in 2007, the Federal Government, following a Territory Government

\textsuperscript{244} The move toward larger shire councils had been ‘flagged’ by the Hon. Loraine Braham, the local government Minister in the previous Country Liberal Party (CLP) NT government, in 1999.
report on child abuse, announced in June 2007, that it was concerned that progress was not occurring and that it would intervene to effect fundamental changes. This announcement primarily targeted law and order, education, and health.

In earlier chapters, I have outlined the series of landmark events that have created situations that made it necessary for the leadership model to respond. They were:

- early intrusions by explorers, miners and others;
- the advent of pastoralism and occupation to the south of Port Keats from 1870;
- associated disease that decimated the Aboriginal population;
- the arrival of missionaries in 1935;
- the world wars;
- the obligation to participate and work in mainstream economic society;
- the advent of welfare payments, or ‘sit-down money’, when suitable work ceased; and
- self-determination (1972), self-management (1975), and the establishment of a community council.

These events and developments have been followed by:

- the establishment of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) by legislation in 1990 and a regional ATSIC council for the wider area;
- the establishment of a NT local government council in the Port Keats region in 2002; and
• the pressure to participate in an Australia-wide Council of Australian Governments’ (COAG) trial in 2003 (Ivory 2005b).

Finally, the challenge in 2007 was one of ‘intervention’ by the Australian Federal Government where many Indigenous leaders were told that they were ineffective, irresponsible, and unable to deal with issues, such as child abuse. Such criticism culminated in a supposition in some quarters that some Indigenous leaders were even perpetuating a state of dependence for their people.

**Reaching Decisions: Middle-aged Male Caucusing and Consensus Building**

This section outlines the decisions made and the adaptations that occurred in order to address and work with the changing circumstances. Such adaptation continues often under difficult and challenging political states. It also details how consensus and inclusion occurs often fostered by the middle-aged leadership group.

Middle-aged males have become adept negotiators and consensus-builders. Such consensus is often cultivated informally outside of normal meetings, and after ‘work’. One method of canvassing views and it is not unique to Indigenous people, but also a feature of mainstream Australian society, is to debate issues during social occasions. In this regard, Port Keats males
have ritualised social drinking as a form of debate and caucusing.\(^{245}\) This contemporary system of *ritus* works toward camaraderie, re-affirmation of family and clan linkages, political and decision-making caucusing, and subsequently regional solidarity. It might be described as possibly the most influential, and anticipated, event on a Thamarrurr male daily routine.

The township of Wadeye is a ‘dry’ community. Through the provisions of the *Liquor Act (NT)* an area, extending from Wadeye, to the Moyle River, is alcohol free for Aboriginal people. The community known as Peppiminarti, some 80 kilometres distance however has a license to sell liquor and does so, six days of the week. Men from the Thamarrurr region organise themselves and drive this distance, along a gravel road to Peppiminarti, have their drinks, and then drive home later the same night.

Organisation of each day’s expedition and the drinking itself is well planned. It usually revolves around middle-aged men (usually cohorts), making the decision that on a particular day they will travel, and then organising the trip and associated financial issues. Usually these men are kin from the same clan, related through an alliance, or related through marriage. They generally make decisions about transport, time of departure, who will go, and how the drinks will be paid for. It is bad ‘form’ if a person goes on the trip without money unless they are a relatively senior clan person.

\(^{245}\) Saez (2004: 157) argues that contemporary ‘shared performances’ of drinking, enable leadership as an outward policy to continue, and certain ‘patterned, collective actions’ centered on ‘a gathering of kin and followers’ supports the political structure.
The drinking bar at Peppiminarti is only open for about three hours. Hence, finances have to be sorted well before it opens to ensure maximum drinking time. Usually the groups that travel together drink in close or nearby proximity to each other. On arrival at Peppiminarti, clan leaders will often begin to congregate, usually in a prominent position, and pleasantries exchanged. This may result in one or two clan leaders ‘shouting’ or buying drinks for the others.\(^{246}\) Whilst some of the discussions are conducted in a lighthearted manner, the topics are often of a local political nature and subsequently a process of caucusing commences. If there is a local council meeting that week, relevant issues may be discussed and agreements made. If there are other political issues say relating to land, clan, people or another matter close to the heart, then these may also be discussed and a consensus reached.

On occasions, a younger person or someone else who may be deemed inappropriate may attempt to enter the circle or ask for a drink or cigarette. Sometimes they are summarily dismissed, given what they want, or abruptly told to ‘piss off’. As long as that person is not too inebriated, they usually move on without causing further disruption. Clansmen in this manner consolidate their position within their own extended family, clan, and language group and with leaders from nearby groups. People from outside the Thamarrurr Regional Council boundary are acknowledged and caucused if an issue is wider then the jurisdiction or not a responsibility of those present. An example of this may be the planning of an initiation ceremony where some of the main actors may live outside the region.

\(^{246}\) An Australian colloquial term for buying others drinks.
I have attended sessions at Peppiminarti and usually been requested to associate with the middle-aged men and sometimes the older men. It should be noted that some men do not engage in the drinking activities or indulge only occasionally. Sometimes these men are too old, are teetotalers, or prefer to drink in other environments. In some instances, it does not seem to affect their input in the caucusing system, although I believe that certainly their information flow is limited. The drinking sessions consolidate leadership and decision making and as Saez (2004: 168) maintains, Indigenous leadership ‘must seek to promote and control’ certain ‘foreign affairs’ in a way that they feel control is maintained and seen to be maintained.

**Local Crises at Wadeye**

From 2002 until early 2006, relationships between the youth of Port Keats and the older and middle-aged groups as well as the non-Indigenous sector, deteriorated. Conflict between the youth groups was a common scene in Wadeye.

It reached a point in March 2006, following a major breakout of violence amongst the groups, when the leaders took affirmative and conciliatory action. The older and middle-aged clan leaders, aware of the affiliations, strength and positive connectedness of their societies’ networked systems, but also aware of the divisiveness that could also be generated, met as a group. Their previous strategy had been to attempt to ignore and not acknowledge the youth leadership and their dysfunctional behaviour. This time they decided to talk, recognise, and re-engage.
In conjunction with the youth groups, they developed plans enabling the youth to move back onto their respective clan estates, be supported by the Council and the elderly leaders, participate in positive work activities, and be recognised as a legitimate power group. A key objective of the plan was to use kin relationships to re-incorporate the Indigenous youth back into family networks and life. By moving the youth to their respective clan estates, it took the pressure off the community at the time and although many of the younger groups later moved back to Wadeye, the middle-aged leaders and elderly leaders now see this as an option, particularly at times of stress. This solution, over simplified here, and precarious at times with a regular need for reconciliation, has enabled the wider community to move on to address issues such as housing, employment and education. It is a further example of Indigenous leadership assessing the situation and readjusting their stance in order to retain the overall cultural fundamentals as well as their authority. The development of youth groups and their motivations will be examined in Chapter Six.

**The Foundations of Middle-aged Authority at Port Keats**

The middle-aged leaders fundamentally derive their authority through the patrilineally based clan structure and its associated identification with certain tracts of land. Such authority itself, as explained in earlier chapters, is esoterically founded in causal, moral and spiritual affiliation to the Law. However, as Myers (1988: 16) argues it is a ‘negotiated’ process that is ‘worked out in a variety of social processes’.

This negotiated physical and associated religious space, with endorsement from ultimate clan leaders, empowers them to ‘speak’ on issues associated with the land and more importantly, in
contemporary contexts, on issues affecting their immediate clan members. Kin relations extend responsibilities and abilities to speak for others outside the clan. If they are perceived in this wider sense as ‘speaking’ responsibly and with altruistic motives, then they may acquire certain delegated authority to engage and negotiate with ‘outsiders’ predominantly non-Aboriginal individuals or entities. They are also authorised to ‘perform’ in public events as organisers and key speakers on behalf of the wider ‘community’.

If a middle-aged leader transgresses his delegated responsibilities and authority, then measures to counter his actions are implemented. Such action may be immediate by a clan elder or elders or it may be delayed and become a group-based action involving sanctions that may be enacted during ceremony. Such action though is rarely taken and this may reflect the reverence that the middle-aged hold for their delegations. It also may reveal some of the enhanced power and resources that the middle-aged can acquire themselves.

The place of authority performance by middle-aged leaders requires comment. It is not a mandate to operate universally on behalf of individuals, the clan, or wider community. For instance, an individual might react aggressively or even violently if a middle-aged leader intrudes upon their personal responsibilities. This might include travelling on an area or site on an estate. It may involve not carrying out, or incorrectly carrying out ritual responsibilities. It might also include, as an example, a sibling or siblings and their behavior. 247 Personal autonomy is a valued asset of people who reside in the Port Keats region.

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247 Siblings can include biological sons or one’s brothers or sister’s sons.
It can be argued therefore that there is a defined performance context and place for the middle-aged leadership actions. Their leadership is not translatable directly into power and authority (although this may be a latent outcome). Political representation responsibilities are a deployment endorsed by higher orders and group-based consensus principles. They cannot overrule the recognised system of leadership that is itself balanced by a previously valued form of egalitarianism.²⁴⁸

**The Delegation of Restricted Authority to the Middle-aged**

During my visits to the Port Keats region in the late 1970s, there were few observable instances of delegation. The council at the time though patronised significantly by Catholic Church officials, consisted primarily of senior elderly leaders. A few years later, an emerging land-owning middle-aged man was ‘thrust’ onto the leadership stage. He was very well educated in Western terms but eventually ‘failed’ as the pressure of leadership and its associated pressures increased.²⁴⁹

It was some years later that the present system of middle-aged leadership emerged. There are numerous leaders of this type which may be described as a coalition of shared responsibility. There are about 6–8 middle-aged leaders that ‘rotate’ the responsibility of being the primary contacts and spokespersons particularly with governments. Occasionally one or two may go on ‘leave’, usually to Darwin, where they are able to relax and recuperate. The other middle-

²⁴⁸ An example of this was played out one day in the local Wadeye supermarket. A very senior man of the local landowning group had reneged on his responsibility to attend a funeral of a kinsman. He was hit on the head by a can of tinned meat thrown by a junior member of his own clan. To my knowledge, even though I expected there to be severe ramifications, there were none.

²⁴⁹ The pressure was so great that this skilled, knowledgeable and approachable man succumbed to alcohol and passed away in Darwin at a young age.
aged leaders in the coalition step into the role thus enabling a sustainable system. This system of leadership has been particularly important since 2002 as the new localised system of local governance emerged, Wadeye became a focused COAG ‘trial’ site and then the intense intervention phase began.

It may appear that the described Port Keats context which positions individuals in a discourse of personal autonomy, egalitarianism, collective decision-making, and occasional ‘big-men’ may lead to confusion resulting in continued conflict. However, the general outcome is one of relative harmony. This appears to be at the heart of the decision by Port Keats elders some years ago to delegate responsibility to younger males. By delegating authority, they not only established a meaningful contact and negotiating point for outside agencies, they also set up a structure of shared power based on trust. This initiative has not only enabled their own age-group to continue as the ultimate group ‘looking after’ others, it has also allocated a possibly restless and challenging younger group a share of the authority base.

The older men ‘look over’ the actions of the middle-aged, only occasionally intervening. They are still the ones with the ultimate decision-making power on ritual and land-owning issues. They are the ones who intervene when disputes are unresolved. They provide a focus and rallying point for clan members to gather. When ceremony and ritual are conducted, usually once a year, they are the ones who are deferred to, referred to and consulted about best practice. They oversee and are the principal actors in religico-ritual events. This reminds everyone of their status and role as a ‘binding agent’ in the sustainability of the society.
Meanwhile the middle-aged men have a role as agents of change, negotiators, brokers, and ‘bridging agents’ between Indigenous and non-Indigenous society. This gives them access to certain resources including jobs, income, housing and also recognition, prestige, and status. They are able to travel to Darwin and elsewhere as part of their role interacting beyond the community of Wadeye and its insularity. The result is one of incorporation rather than seclusion.

**Summary and Conclusion**

This chapter, focussing on middle-aged leadership emerging from the late 1960s to the early 1980s, has examined aspects of socio-economic change in the Port Keats region coupled with significant policy changes by government that impacted appreciably on community life. It argues that the ‘gap’ in understanding and skills, particularly with relation to administration and local government, had widened to such an extent by the 1970s that the senior leadership regime made a conscious decision to advance and extend the decision-making and associated power of the middle-aged groups in community affairs. This subsequently extended to a formalised local government structure that embodied ‘traditional’ ideology of governance and dispute resolution.

The data presented in this chapter contrasts with that presented in Chapter Two. When Stanner arrived with the first missionaries in the 1930s, he found a situation where the middle-aged were disenfranchised to some degree particularly when it came to women. Although they were recognised by the elderly as initiated, and had, in some cases been through many of the
ceremonies, most of the key decisions were made by the older leaders. My research found that
during the past 6 years, many of the political decisions in the mainstream context, had been
passed on to the middle-aged leadership group.

Despite an ever-changing environment, the evidence suggests there has always been a
substantial degree of willingness, on the part of leaders and groups at Port Keats, to actively
engage and survive. Indigenous initiated changes, accommodation, and reconstitution occurred
in response to massive interventions that, in some instances, included challenges on physical
and psychological fronts. It was only the resilience of the people and leadership adaptations
that enabled them to re-engage on other fronts and continue their lives. The evidence strongly
challenges the supposition by some public and research commentators (Radcliffe-Brown 1913;
Sharp 1958; Meggitt 1962; Hirst 2007; Howard and Brough 2007) that Indigenous leadership
was, and is, ill-defined and unresponsive. However, issues for Indigenous leadership at Port
Keats have not all come from outside their local political domain. They have also come from
within their own society.

By re-negotiating and repositioning the decision-making process, the elders were able to not
only positively transform the wider groups’ role in the intercultural field, but also formalise,
sustain, and extend their own power base. They once again reinforced their authority coalition,
thus ensuring their own continued existence as individual and group entities, by strategic
social and political repositioning and negotiation.
A societal development and dilemma of considerable consequence began to take place in the Port Keats region from about 1980 onwards (Ivory 2003). Groups of young boys and men, for reasons that will be explored, began to formalise alliances that were later to be referred to as ‘gangs’.250 Today, such groups are very influential in the region and are able to exert considerable power either directly or coercively. Such power may be considered as dysfunctional and disruptive to (and by) the wider community; conversely, it may be viewed as a positive form of group solidarity, cohesion, protection and resistance. The groups have divided and subdivided increasingly in number and there has been the co-emergence of allied female versions of such groups. This chapter will examine the structure of these groups, their leadership, culture, the outcomes that they achieve and the impact on other leadership. It will do so within a framework of sociological and anthropological analysis of such entities.

250 The term ‘gangs’ was particularly fostered by media accounts in newspapers such as the NT News. Sullivan (2006: 15–16) argues that the term is too vague and the media ‘feed on’ and reinforce the tendency to reify youth gangs.
**Literature on Youth Groups and Gangs**

Before examining the youth groups of Port Keats, some of the perspectives on gangs and delinquency research in popular discourse should be outlined.

There are several theories of delinquency and gang research including cultural deviance, social strain, differential association, and learning theory. Durkheim (1982) argues that deviance is an integral part of all societies because it affirms cultural norms and values. Hirschi (1969) expanding on Durkheim’s concept of ‘integration’, argues that an individual who is detached from societal institutions is more likely to become delinquent to one who is integrated. However, Esbensen, Huizinga, and Weiher (1993) disagree and argue that youths who bonded to peers are more likely to join gangs. Others such as Parsons (1964) and Merton (1957) maintain that identifying deviant behaviour is central to the process of generating and sustaining cultural values, clarifying moral boundaries and promoting social solidarity.

Cohen (1972: xii) argues that individuals join in a collective response to create a delinquent subculture. Groups reject the success goals of mainstream culture, replace them with alternative sets of norms and values in terms of how they can achieve success, and gain prestige. These alternative norms and values are contrary, he argues, to the values of mainstream culture. He describes the delinquent subculture as characterised by malice, a pleasure in upsetting other people in authority and in breaking conventional taboos. Those who perform successfully in terms of the values of the subculture gain recognition and prestige in the eyes of their peers. Social disobedience becomes a valued activity and a source
of social status. Cohen argues that ‘the latent function of subculture … [is] to express and resolve, albeit ‘magically’, the contradictions which remain hidden or unresolved in the parent culture’, and ‘to combine these with elements selected from other class factions, symbolising one or other of the options confronting it’ (see Cohen cited in Sheperd and Wicke 1997: 29).

Wilkins (1964) points out that where the social reaction to deviance is stereotyped, oversimplified or based on incorrect information, it is likely to cause greater social isolation of the deviants. It can lead, Wilkins (1964: 548) argues, to ‘moral panics and labelling’. Cohen and Young (1973: 365) argue that the constant repetition of the warring gang’s image actually gives ‘loose collectivities’ a structure that they might not have possessed otherwise and a mythology to justify the structure. Further, they point out that the mass media and societal reaction can reinforce a predisposition to expect trouble, spread hostile beliefs, create stereotypes, and polarise the deviants against wider society. This in turn through the action of the police and courts sets up a ‘spiral of deviancy amplification’ (Cohen and Young 1973: 366–367). Meanwhile Hetherington (1998) argues that whilst the resistance theory has been popular, subcultures are as much about order. Gangs, Spergel (1995: 70–78) argues, offer overarching orientations of community.

Turner and Surace (1956: 14–20) in their classic study of the 1943 Zoot Suit riots argue that through symbolism and associated negativity, there emerges a ‘badge of delinquency’. Papachristos (cited in Knox 2000: 525) argues that traditional forms of ‘rites of passage’ have disappeared for some youth. Other cultures retain it and he gives the example of Bar Mitzvah
and Catechism. When it is gone, according to Papachristos, youth will often recreate their own in the form of gangs.

Thrasher’s (1927) seminal work, *The Gang: A Study of 1,313 Gangs in Chicago*, emphasised the relationship between gangs and their physical and social surrounds. The Chicago School, as it is known, advanced a contextual paradigm focused on the ecological structure of the city, and on the diverse and conflicting forces operating within local communities. More recently, a ‘variables paradigm’, in which concern is with outcome rather than process, with effect rather than cause has gained prominence (Hughes 2006; Abbott 1997, 1999; Sampson 2000). This paradigm surveys variables such as prevalence and characteristics of gangs, gang members, and gang-related crime.

The sociological theory of ‘social disorganization’ (Park and Burgess 1924; Shaw and Mackay 1942; Thrasher 1927) provides an explanation for gang formation relating to to disintegration of social customs and institutions. Gang behaviour ‘fills a gap’ in a social framework that is disintegrating (Thrasher 1927: 12–13). Wilson’s (1987) ‘underclass’ perspective argues that the gang actually fills a social void and provides a form of sustenance. Hagedorn (2006), in a macrolevel explanation, argues that ‘social disorganization’ and ‘juvenile delinquency’ are too narrow in their definition; he argues that what has occurred is that globalisation and the retreat of the State has actually strengthened ‘resistance identities’ in the form of gangs and other identities. Instead of excluding them, he argues, they should be included in the dialogue of social discourse.
Social network analysis (Marsden 1990; Wasserman and Faust 1994; Wellman 1983) stresses the interdependence among social actors. Papachristos (2006) argues that by using the gang as a unit of analysis, intra- or inter-group relations can be examined and their influence on contextual factors such as mechanisms of social control measured. Most theorists agree that the link between gang membership and delinquency is important (Curry and Spergel 1992; Esbensen and Huizinga 1993; Fagan 1989). Linkages have also been made between gang membership and lower socio-economic status (Hirschi 1969), adolescence (Thornberry et al 1993), being male (Esbensen and Huizinga 1993; Harris 1988), ethnic minority status and identity (Hagedorn 1988; Vigil 1988), and lack of influence by parents (Fagan 1989; Fagan, Piper, and Moore 1986).

**A ‘Group’ or a ‘Gang’?**

Thrasher (cited in Grennan, Britz, Rush and Barker 2000: 4) argues that a gang does not evolve until ‘it begins to excite disapproval and opposition’. It then becomes a ‘conflict group’. He points out that such gangs or associations often form to protect themselves against others. Miller (cited in Grennan, Britz, Rush and Barker 2000: 9–10) identified six major elements of a gang as:

- being organized;
- having identifiable leadership;
- identifying with a territory;
- having continual association;
- having a specific purpose; and
• being engaged in illegal activities.

Gangs, from an international perspective, are usually associated with violence. Members talk about incidents, retell the story, and use it as a focal point. Such reviewing of the incident assists in glorifying the incident and individuals involved. It also assists in consolidating gang procedures for future altercations. Violence serves as a solidifying force and is required to maintain territorial integrity. Knox (2000: 335) points out that graffiti communicates the symbols, the leaders, the enemies, fallen or deceased members, or informs rival gang members that an opposition gang is intent on killing.

Klein et al. (2001: 9) argues that ‘Gangs don’t spontaneously generate like compost fires, but are spawned by the very nature of the structure and composition of our communities’. Esterle-Hedibel (2001) describes Algerian gangs in France bound by a shared history. Their subculture, according to Esterle-Hedibel (2001: 205) consists of ‘bits and pieces of their culture of origin’ and this is ‘patched together in a specific type of acculturation’.

Keiser (1969) argues that gangs, even though their behaviour may be deviant, have structure, systems of organisation, and sets of commonly held values. They are, Keiser (1969: vii) argues, part of a larger behavioural system and to understand their behaviour we have to understand the wider system. In his study, culture and social system are the basic organising concepts.
The Evolution of Youth Groups at Port Keats

There are several versions of when and why the youth groups at Port Keats began to emerge. Two explanations have been offered by people who were working at Wadeye at the time. The first person, a man who worked at Wadeye in the 1980s, relates things developed in early 1980. Movies starring Bruce Lee and other Kung Fu martial arts experts were shown at an open-air theatre in the community. After, or during the movie, young boys would emulate their heroes by imitating various moves, fighting other groups and occasionally such fights began to get out of hand. From this began to emerge groups that would engage in wider conflict and other activities.

A second version was related to me by Gerry McCormack (2005: pers. com), a retired and very well respected principal of the school. He said that in the early 1980s, the Catholic nuns began to show recorded episodes of ‘Countdown’ at the school. Such recordings were immensely popular, particularly with young males, who had been encouraged to learn to play musical instruments through the school. Various groups began to form, often along family and kinship lines, and they commenced writing and recording some of their own songs. Many of these songs, according to Furlan (2005) are about one’s clan estate. Over time such musical groups transformed into structures that went beyond musical genres and became a ‘way of life’. McCormack commented that whilst during the 1980s, music was the primary catalyst and objective, for the formation of such groups. By the early 1990s, the situation changed as the number of youths increased dramatically and available positive activities decreased.

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251 Countdown was a popular Australia-wide rock music program during the 1970s and 80s televised by the Australia Broadcasting Commission (ABC).
Whilst these views describe the actual events leading to youth group emergence, there needs to be further analysis completed on the underlying reasons for such sub-cultural transformation. Previous chapters have explained the hierarchy and authority that was present in several forms. One form was through the senior male development and nurturing structure itself. The second was that exercised through the Catholic Church and its mechanisms of regimentation, protocol, stratification and authority. By the 1980s many of the younger generation may have begun to see that their life-opportunities, compared to their peers, was severely limited. By ‘rebelling’, creating sub-structures and causing mayhem, they were not only making their own community take notice of them, but they were also creating a form of resistance against the dominant society represented to a large degree by the Church; something, which they believed their fathers, in embracing the Church, had not done. In effect, they were responding to massive societal change. They were also, from the perspective of this thesis, making a bid for a share of the leadership base that was increasingly being denied them, allegedly for indiscretions, as the old men withheld knowledge and power.

Interestingly, Stanner (1966: 109) had written about fifty years earlier about the ‘noticeable’ change in young adult males as ‘traditional circumcisions ceased at Port Keats in the mid-1940s’. He argued that the older men at that time had spoken about the ‘indiscipline of the new generation’ and their ‘disrespect toward authority’ (Stanner 1966: 109).

Stanner (1979: 44) had voiced his concerns for young Aboriginal people but at the same time commented that it was misleading to believe that tradition had ‘collapsed’ into some sort of a void. He argued that it had been replaced by a restless activism and opportunism. He warned,
with some intuitive insight, that there was growing unrest among the young and there was
‘little competent inquiry occurring into their grievances and aspirations’ (Stanner 1979: 44).

**The Structure of the Groups**

When I first worked at Wadeye in 1978, I did not observe, nor was aware of gang-type
behaviour. By the time I returned to Wadeye in 2001, the groups had emerged as an active
structured locus of power, with a considerable amount of attached symbolism and magnetism.
They were referring to themselves often with such brazen names such as Evil Warriors, Judas
Priest, Bad Boys, Fear Factory, Big T and so on. There were a few girl youth groups as well;
one by the name of the Kylie Girls. In an interview I had with a group leader in prison in 2003,
he referred to his group as ‘family’, explained that they had formed in 1997, and became
agitated when I put it to him that the media and many other agencies were calling them
‘gangs’. He explained that they had formed as a means of ‘protection’.

During 2001 to 2003, there were about fourteen groups that were sometimes changing in terms
of membership and composition, in existence (Ivory 2003). The younger groups included
youths ranging from about seven to fourteen years of age. The older and more powerful
groups ranged in age from about fifteen to about twenty-five years; although it was noted that
some members were aged from twenty-five to thirty-five and this raises the question about
what age, if any, one reaches before becoming ‘ineligible’ for membership.
During the same period, the Evil Warrior was the dominant group, but since then, mainly due to the maturing age of the Judas Priest group members, and their increasing numbers, there has been a shift in the power scenario. There have also been shifts depending on alliances and if one group amalgamates with another group or pledges support. Nevertheless, the Evil Warriors tends to aggravate and initiate conflict at particular times.

The Evil Warriors primarily consist of young boys and men who belong to the Murrinh-patha speaking language group. Many are from the *Kardu Diminin* land-owning group or from nearby clans. Their structure in this regard is similar to that of Nemarluk and the Red Band of Warriors, 80 years previously. Their networks are primarily nurtured through kin relations. However, strengthened by common enemies and prison affiliations, they extend their web of associations with others. Hence, they can travel as far afield as Kununurra or Darwin, where they can find support and sustenance for the various activities they engage in. Their leadership is prominent and very influential on the followers. The ability to expand and enhance their networks, and their nodes of leadership, is notably a characteristic of the elderly leadership group. Similarly, there is continuity and persistence among the leadership of the younger groups amidst change.

The members of each group have certain characteristics, possibly as a distinction of their generation. They generally:

- are aged between 8-25 years;
- have poor education levels;
• are unemployed;
• have limited intercultural communication skills; and
• have had (in many cases) limited cultural and ceremonial induction.

However, this is not always the case. Some of the leaders, in particular, have had reasonably good education and occasionally have been to school in Darwin. Some are older than 25. Some have been through most of the relevant rituals and still participate in ceremonies, if and when the elders are cooperative.

Reactions of Other Generations

The middle-aged, elderly and many of the younger people especially women, are perplexed and exasperated by the activities of the youth groups. Nevertheless, they often regard transition toward youth group membership as part of ‘normal’ life passage for teenagers under current circumstances. Occasionally locals would explain to me that once teenagers have been accepted into a youth group, they then go on to ‘university’ (prison).\textsuperscript{252} Desmarchelier (2000) collated a series of interview documents that reflected a wide portion of the older and middle-aged views of life at Wadeye.

\textsuperscript{252} See also Dewar (1999: 56–67) who referred to Fannie Bay Gaol as ‘the university at that time’.
The central document records ‘We know we do not control our community. Our young boys who have lost all sense of meaning in their lives rule our community through fear. We sometimes live in fear of our own children’ (Desmarchelier 2000: 26–27).

Desmarchelier (2000: 28) argued that he had found that there had been a process of rejection of the ‘new ways’ and that young people displayed this rejection with anti-social behaviour such as substance abuse, non-attendance at school, graffiti, actively seeking incarceration, theft, youth group association, and other behaviour. Similarly, whilst I was attending a Thamarrurr, police and government officers’ meeting on 15 December 2002, a senior Yek Yederr clan elder in exasperation exclaimed:

Well I’ll tell you mob something. We are shit scared of the gangs! I worry for my family and myself. They know if we dob them in. They’ve got spies everywhere. It’s easy for you mob (outsiders) to say the leaders need to be strong and do something about it. But I don’t want to die young!

(Ivory 2003)\textsuperscript{253}

\textsuperscript{253} This particular clan leader passed away in 2006.
**Group Foundations**

A leader of the Evil Warriors spoke candidly about his fierce allegiance to his clan’s country, *Yek Nangu*, Murrinh-patha language group (JS cited in Ivory 2003: 66). When asked why the group started in the first place, he explained its primary role as a protector of their land and the extended family itself:

> If someone threatens our family, then we fight them. We protect our street. We protect our family, street, property, and our cars … We are fighting for our land. Some blokes are a bit slack and don’t know how to protect their land. My father, when I was young and going through initiation, took me and showed me my clan’s *noimingi* (totemic sites). My father said don’t be stupid … look after it and pass it on to your kids and grandkids. Keep white-fellas from destroying it.

People with affiliation to certain country and who are living at Wadeye, reside as geographically close, to their country as possible. For example, the *Rak Nadirri* and *Rak Perrederr* groups (associated with the Judas Priest group) live on the northern side of town. The *Yek Nangu* group live on the southeastern side. An example of this was during fighting going on between the groups. The group that was receiving a beating took refuge back on their home country (*Rak Kirnmu*) until the trouble had subsided.
Certain core values appear foundational within the groups (Ivory 2003). These values include:

- respect for fellow group members;
- acknowledgement and unqualified support for their group leaders;
- primacy of the group above all else;
- a fear of little including authority; the only fear, if you call it that, is toward a superior group. Such fear might only be held by members further down in the pecking order and certainly not openly conveyed by the group leaders;
- a grudging respect for other groups (particularly if the other group or groups are on a level playing field in terms of fighting ability); and
- a belief that violence and destruction will solve most problems. They very much adhere to the payback policy of ‘an eye for an eye–a tooth for a tooth’.

It also became obvious to the author that there are other values held although these might not often be explicit nor openly displayed:

- a respect for certain kin and kinship obligations;
- an affiliation to country; and
- a desire for respect of the group and individual within wider society and a desire to participate as an equal in such society (in Port Keats and beyond).

These values compare to general values that have been reported to be held by the wider Aboriginal population at Wadeye; namely trust, reciprocity, unity, taking ownership of problems, respect, belief in self-capacity, kindness and motherly love, tough love, personal and community sharing, and concern for community members (Memmott 2002: 10).
The proclamation of territorial areas and a group’s ‘side of town’ is reinforced with graffiti. Port Keats graffiti usually proclaims the name of the group that one is associated with; for example the Evil Warriors or it may be a symbol associated with the group. The Fear Factory group for example uses two inverted F figures with one reversed. It also may include, and in the majority of cases does, the name of the heavy metal group that the group associates itself with. In some cases, there may be a brief statement for example: ‘Iced F … Earth 666’ (Iced Earth is a heavy metal band). In most cases an individual may, in code or initials, inscribe their European name, family, clan group, and ceremonial group; for example ESJN.

The graffiti is used to define group territory and claims by other groups, for that territory. As previously mentioned group territory is generally defined by the geographical proximity to one’s clan territory. Occasionally incursions may occur when one group will write graffiti close to or in another’s territory. This is seen as a challenge and a threat. The graffiti may be seen on and in houses, offices, the supermarket, on the airport terminal and virtually any physical structure including bitumen roads. The Evil Warriors extend their networks to suburban Darwin, and their graffiti is seen occasionally at places such as East Point beach, Northlakes supermarket, and other enclaves. The author often had graffiti inscribed in dust on his car within minutes of entering a certain area. It is not limited to males. On one occasion at an outstation, females (sisters and girlfriends of members) inscribed a group’s name and other slogans on the vehicle I was driving. The graffiti does not appear to be primarily sexual or racist. It could be described as denoting, ‘This is our name, we are here, and this is our territory’. It is more a proclamation of identity, presence and rights.
Similarly, the groups have their own particular means of communication including ‘whistles’. Particular calls and shrill whistles becon, entice, warn, and muster support amongst members. During conflict with others, the calls strategically align members to those requiring assistance and in some circumstances when to engage.

**Symbolism and Identity**

Another important symbolic marker is that of the musical genre adopted by the groups. Sheperd and Wicke (1997: 213) argue that music has ‘a special capacity to exercise power’ in a direct and concrete fashion. It can ‘speak’ directly, concretely and with precision to the states of awareness that constitute our very being (Sheperd and Wicke 1997: 213). They argue that it is a material structure whose role it is to impart the principles of symbolic structuring to society, language and other forms of human expression. The groups at Port Keats have embraced and adopted particular Western heavy metal bands as their own. Frith and McRobbie (1978: 6) argue from a socialisation process viewpoint that heavy metal is ‘loud, rhythmically insistent, built around techniques of arousal and climax, and the lyrics are assertive and arrogant’.

Walser (1993: 29–30) whilst referring to heavy metal music argues:

> Musical meanings are always grounded socially and historically, and they operate on an ideological field of conflicting interests, institutions and memories.
Particularly popular in Port Keats are bands such as Fear Factory (they describe themselves as extreme alternative, however others classify their music as Death Metal or occasionally Industrial Metal), Slayed, Judas Priest, Iced Earth, Metallica, Pantera and others. Each group relates to a specific band. For example, the Evil Warriors affiliate with the band Iced Earth, Big T with Anthrax and the Judas Priest youth group with Metallica. My first inclination was to relate the themes of ‘Satanism’, ‘fear’, ‘the Devil’, ‘death’, that continually appears in the music and other material culture of the groups, to an anti-Christ theme associated possibly with the Catholic Church. However, further investigations appear to support the view that such association with these themes occurs more as a means to antagonise their older generation, rather than the Church itself.

The Church aligned themselves, intentionally or not, with the middle- aged and elderly believers and this gap appears to have widened as time has gone on. However, there does not appear to be any concerted effort, physical or otherwise, against Church individuals or their physical assets by the groups. In fact, one story related to me by an informant was how one day when a street fight was in full swing between two groups, an old nun walked through the middle of it and she was not harassed or harmed in any way. This is not to say that there is not an anti-Christ theme, however it could be not explicitly displayed or acknowledged. The campaign may be more about mocking the ‘selling of souls’ by the older people to the Church, with the perception that they have sacrificed their own culture. It could also be the perception that whilst many of the elderly say they are Christians and wear paraphernalia such as large crosses round their neck, often their behaviour (such as getting drunk, neglecting their families) is contradictory to their supposed beliefs. Certainly the group leaders and others
openly at times and inferred at others, hold the elders of today as weak and aligned to a Church that in a sense has deserted them.

The heavy metal electric sound that consumes individual emotions is described as ‘raw power’ (Iced Earth 2003: 1), ‘sonic destruction’ (Fear Factory 2003: 1), and ‘blitzkrieg heavy metal’ (Halford 2003: 1). It is loud, brutal, and aggressive. As Roach (cited in Rose 1994: 62) argues, ‘The “sound” I tell them, that’s the final answer to any question in music – the sound’. However, the lyrics in heavy metal music are just as aggressive and to gain further insight into the psyche of the subculture we need to examine these as well.

Various themes emerge from the heavy metal music popular with the Port Keats youth. A theme that emerges repeatedly from the Port Keats youth group’s music is that of the ‘warrior’ who is defiant, but who in many cases suffers a violent death. The warrior has a noble cause, provides a resistance, and fights for a future. Each individual is a warrior of life who has suffered hardship and pain. Fear Factory, a band very popular with the younger youth groups, proclaim in their song titled ‘Martyr’:

Born into hardship
World of destruction
Suffer, bastard
Suffer, bastard
(Fear Factory 1992)
Emotions

There is depression associated with pain as individuals strive to deal with their emotions. The song ‘Leechmaster’ describes the hurt an individual may feel:

Come and take my pain
And soon you will see
That I will
taste your pain
Then both of us can bleed

(Fear Factory 2004)

Injustice and Repression

Another theme is that society is breaking down but at the same time there is a new future. Ordinary people have to revolt against ‘government conspiracy’ to create a new destiny. They need to show their anger and fight to bring about the demise of the current ‘f… up society’ (Fear Factory 2003: 1). The world needs its ‘bad ass to get kicked’ (Halford 2003: 2). Fear Factory describe in the song ‘Your Mistake’ how people have been lied to and how there is no longer any trust:
Tell us lies and ask us why
We hate society
And we’re here to fight
I won’t shake their hands
Cause they’re not our friends
(Fear Factory 1995)

God and Christianity

There is a theme that once people put their trust in Christianity, they were subsequently betrayed. Now is the time to go your own way, not so much embrace the Devil, but to respect Evil. Fear Factory explains in ‘Big Godraped Souls’ that God is not going to help you:

God raped souls
Of our lives
Hammers crush all our lives
Just like clockwork
They’ll crush our lives
(Fear Factory 2002)

Insecurity

The band, Judas Priest sing about the how youth are ‘never gonna qualify’ in the song ‘Hell is Home’:
Oh look down your noses at me
Hating my identity
Oh but that don’t mean a damn thing you see
‘Cause down here in hell everybody loves me

(Judas Priest 2003)

Defiance

Much of the heavy metal music challenges the listeners to be defiant. It is time to stand up for your rights. The Judas Priest song ‘Dead Meat’ calls for ‘no surrender’:

I will not obey
I will not betray
I will not give in
Not while I’m living

(Judas Priest 1997)

The groups will often dance to their associated heavy metal band (Ivory 2003). At local discos they wait outside the hall in a group until their song comes on, then together they move to centre stage. Many have hoods covering their head. They will then walk, always in an anti-clockwise direction (regardless of who the youth group is), with heads bowed. Every now and again, at a certain point, they stop for perhaps two seconds and either gesture with an imaginary microphone or pretend they are playing guitar. They then re-commence the walk. There appears to be no age limitation with young children about 5 years of age also joining in
and following their older kin and peers. At the discos I attended, there appeared to be respect and deference shown for other parties (including middle-aged people dancing to rock and roll) in terms of the sequence of dancing and every group being allowed to perform. The music being played by local young people was very well organised and each group had their song played in a synchronised manner.

During the years of my research, there has been an increased association of the groups, depending on supply, with drugs, usually cannabis. On one particular night when I was present at the hall, there was considerable anticipation of a cache of marijuana being delivered from Darwin. At this particular time, there was excitement due to the impending arrival of the drugs but no fighting or violence. In contrast, it appears, often when there is an outbreak of violence, it is because the supply of drugs has ‘dried up’.

Interestingly, the leader of the Evil Warriors when asked about heavy metal music said, ‘The other younger members of our group are into heavy metal. I prefer the Bee Gees, the Everly Brothers, Don Williams and country music’. Another observation of the Port Keats Aboriginal youth affiliation to heavy metal is that rarely does one see a black heavy metal musician. Similarly, one rarely sees a female heavy metal musician.

There has been a trend by some of the groups toward Rap music although it has not overtaken heavy metal as a primary form of symbolism. Rose (1994: 2) argued that Rap is about ‘how to avoid youth group pressures and earn local respect, how to deal with the loss of friends to gun fights and drug overdoses, and they tell grandiose and sometimes violent tales that are
powered by male sexual power over women’. Rose argues that Rap and the associated hip-hop culture are cultural, political, and commercial forms, and for many young people they are the primary cultural, sonic, and linguistic windows on the world (Rose 1994: 19).

**Reasons for Conflict**

There are various reasons and ways used by the groups to trigger engagement and fights. Explanations vary depending on the particular group that it emanates from. An Evil Warriors spokesperson advised that he is disillusioned with the older Aboriginal people in the wider community of Port Keats. He said, for instance, that whilst the ‘number one ceremony is still important’, the elders had ‘stopped the ceremony’. He said that the re-emergence of *Thamarrurr* and the establishment of a new local council structure based on its traditional principles, was good. However, ‘they (the elders) kept *melmelmel* (a ceremonial conflict resolution/decision-making structure) from us’. This is possibly, what he meant when he said, it was ‘stopped’ – the leaders deliberately were not engaging with the younger people and at that time, the ceremonies in effect had ceased. He was at pains to emphasise that his ‘family’ is paramount. When asked what the ‘family’ consists of, he replied, ‘Myself, my brother, my nephews, my cousin’s sister, my brother-in-law (and others it is assumed within his extended family, as he was trying to give a broad view of what the ‘family’ is)’.

As mentioned, the Evil Warriors are made up of young men with allegiances to the Murrinh-patha side of local politics, particularly the land-owning *Diminin* clan and outbreaks often relate to dissent about ‘foreigners’ on the land of Wadeye. Fights often begin at the local
supermarket or take-away, regarded as being the ‘centre’ of town, and may be instigated by comments or a slur on one’s character. Sometimes it may be a derogatory remark about one’s relatives. Occasionally fights begin amongst girls and spread, eventually involving the senior group members.

There are particular shrill whistles that are used amongst group members to alert each other of danger, or to take strategic positions. Felix Bunduck (2005: pers. com) explained to me that such communication techniques relate back to the ‘old days’. He explained:

Diminin mob used to fight with the Moyle area … for women. Sneak up in the night. Young people got the model today from this. Quillung, a call … like showing off … you know young boys. But they (the young boys) can sing out if they want to … that’s their business!

**Relationships between Generations**

Many of the youth group members have been initiated and exposed to some ceremony. However, to some degree their exposure to the more complex rituals and knowledge has been withheld. There appears to be a wide gap between the old and the young. For instance, an Evil Warriors leader said that his father (deceased) had told him about the importance of nanthi kulu. His clan Yek Nangu used to exchange, amongst other items, spears with the respective clan groups. He said, ‘But now the old men have forgotten, they don’t have it now’. He said

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254 As previously mentioned, a form of ceremonial trade.
‘now there is a new generation and a lot has changed’. In fact, however, *nanthi kulu* is still practised at various levels; it is just that the older men are restricting it to their own generation.

The situation today, and the restlessness of the young, may not be very different to the past. Stanner (cited in Ivory 2005c: 5) in the 1950s asked Nym Bunduck, ‘what about them young fellas growing up? Never know they might take hold of that gun … so take the shell out.’ The young at that time were considered a threat to the old men, hence the use of ceremonies to control and discipline them. The older men controlled most of the resources, including women, and from the evidence, kept a wary eye on the impatient youth.

A principal leader of the Evil Warriors has a good knowledge of the avoidance system. He said he was often upset because, ‘Many people misuse it. For example, poison cousins, and the way brother and sister act – no one gives a fuck’. Once again, contrary to this view, most of the older people adhere religiously to kin relationship practices, although the young do not appear to in some instances. This leader is very passionate about the preservation of the traditional culture. He argues that this cannot happen if the elders keep the knowledge to themselves. He said, ‘The old words (the ceremonial songs) should be taught to the young and the elders shouldn’t keep it to themselves’.

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255 At one stage, ceremonies were stopped indefinitely by a ceremonial leader who was upset with fighting generally by the groups.
Many of the younger generation have an intimate knowledge of the exploits of Nemarluk and the Red Band of Warriors. Some are able to give detailed and accurate accounts of Nemarluk’s life, including his various escapes from the police and from Fannie Bay Gaol. Certainly, he is a model of resistance. During one interview, a group leader said ‘What Nemarluk did was good; he was protecting his country and his family. My grandfather worked in with Nemarluk (Mr K. 2003: pers. com).

**Group Membership and Conflict**

The Evil Warriors have strict rules for inclusion as members of the group and this appears to be primarily based on family affiliation. During an interview with the leader of the Evil Warriors, he said, ‘only some people can be members. Others can join in (the activities) but they can’t be members’. When asked how one became a member, he replied, ‘You have to speak the Truth. You don’t tell bullshit if someone (from the Evil Warriors) asks you something and you tell a lie’. When one becomes a member, that person is entitled to comradeship, protection from violence by other groups, protection for their family members, an enhanced reputation in the youth fraternity, and the possibility of additional female relationships.

The groups have comprehensive information and communication networks throughout the immediate and wider region, even within the Northern Territory prison system. This network has been further enhanced by the introduction of the mobile phone system to Wadeye. Threats, innuendo and the coordination of fights are conducted through the phone network.
To become a member, one has to be a ‘good, strong fighter’. Each group is constantly testing their member’s skills, and train their members in the skills of boxing and with various weapons. On one occasion when I met with some members, they openly displayed a range of weapons. They included traditional spears, machetes and knives. There are ‘rules of engagement’ and a notion of a ‘fair fight’. In other words if someone is knocked down, they are allowed to get up and continue the fight. A prison warden informed me that many from the Port Keats are good boxers and hold their own within the mainstream prison system. Another warden informed me that Port Keats inmates are often feared by other Aboriginal people and non-Aboriginal inmates because of the ferocity of their fighting, and because they usually have a number of cohorts to support them.

When conflict breaks out en masse in the community situation, the combat also follows certain patterns. It is generally thrust and then retreat. This trend follows patterns recorded by Stanner from early Daly River observations. The combatants might initially be members of the youth group, however as the fight escalates it can involve middle-aged and older members as well. Sometimes they may be engaged in the combat, or attempting to diffuse it. Rarely are there serious injuries, although potentially, given the amount of rocks, spears and other objects that are thrown, there could be tragic outcomes.

However, there was a fatality in 2002, which has underlined conflict since and influenced a shift in the power base of the groups. The two key leaders of the Evil Warriors were in prison. Their contemporaries in the meantime continued their relentless fighting and hostile activities
toward the other groups and in November 2002 a fight was in progress at the football oval involving members of the Evil Warriors and the Judas Priest groups. The details, which were subject to a prolonged coronial inquiry, vary slightly depending on whose account it is. The outcome was that a local youth, not a member of the Judas Priest group but a close relation, tried to disarm another youth of a shotgun. The shotgun went off, firing into the ground, a nearby police officer then fired a series of shots killing one youth and wounding another.²⁵⁶

The Judas Priest group members were outraged, not so much at the police, but at their arch-enemies, the Evil Warriors for initiating the fight in the first place. They went on a rampage ransacking twelve houses and burning five cars that were associated with (by kin relationships) the Evil Warriors. The Evil Warriors and their relatives, old and young, women and children fled to Rak Kirnmu owned country, at the site of the old mission. A major attempt was made by the police to bring them back to Wadeye to seek resolution. However, it degenerated into a chaotic situation involving group members as well as other people. The Judas Priest group was elated at its success.

Thamarrurr Council met soon after with the police and resolved to attempt to bring matters to a head and possibly resolution. The Yek Diminim land-owning group met the day after and made a decision that individuals and groups who engaged in violence would be evicted back to their own land. The Police Task Force came the following day, and the Judas Priest group

²⁵⁶ The police officer was later acquitted of all charges in the Supreme Court. During the coronial inquest in 2007, the relieving policeman who shot the youth was described as being ‘hampered by poor judgement’ during his career and ‘was abrupt and overbearing toward prisoners’. The Coroner found that the fatal bullet wound indicated ‘that the deceased had his back facing Whittington (police officer) when he was shot’ (See Supreme Court Proceedings 2007).
and their associates were moved in a relatively peaceful fashion back to the clan country of Rak Nadirri.

I had the opportunity, in ensuing weeks, to meet with the Evil Warriors and the Judas Priest groups on their own country and in prison. At the first meeting with the Judas Priest group, on their country of Rak Nadirri, they spoke about their continuing anger with the other group, that there was unfinished business, however that in the longer term, peace could possibly be restored if the other group wanted it. They spoke about the ‘bad’ nature of the other group but, interestingly, at no time expressed any real resentment toward the police in the whole affair. They also spoke about their desire for a better life, the need for respect in general, and their willingness to do work on their clan country. Six years later, violence would still occasionally erupt as group members perceived that the boy’s death had not been properly avenged.

Judas Priest members at Nadirri, looked in prime physical condition often sparring with each other using socks as gloves. They said that later the night of my visit they were going out to drag a net for fish. At the meeting the leader and vice-leader of the group did most of the talking (mostly in language), with occasional interventions from the clan elders who were present. Despite being told on numerous occasions that the youth group members would never listen to the elders, nor show respect, this did not at any time become obvious to me; in fact quite the contrary. It should be noted though that the confidence and authority shown by the youth group members had rarely been seen before by the author in a situation where there
were elders and young members of the same clan group present (neither in the Port Keats region nor in other parts of the NT).

**Aggression and Moral Panics**

The primary targets of aggression by the youth groups are interesting. During the period of research and reportedly in earlier years, there appeared to be rare occurrences of aggression by the groups against Church personnel or property. Most aggression was directed against other groups, the relations of those group members, property owned by groups or their relatives, or property that was owned by the government or the local council. Certainly, the aggression did not appear to be of a racial nature.

The so-called ‘gangs’ of Port Keats are a favorite item of the NT News (2000; 2002a; 2002b; 2003; 2004b) and occasionally in national publications such as The Australian newspaper (2007). The Wadeye situation symbolises much that is dysfunctional in Aboriginal affairs and is regularly used by the media as a case study to stimulate moral panics. This is not new for the region as even in the 1930s, the exploits of Nemarluk were used as an example of the treachery of untamed Aboriginal people inhabiting a wild frontier. Headlines in recent times are as follows:

- Police overwhelmed in community gang fight
- NT News (2000)
Gang boss sent to jail – A man said to be the leader of a Port Keats gang and looked up to by some people because of his skill with his fists has been sentenced to 15 months jail … K…, 26, who the court heard was head of the Evil Warriors gang …

NT News (2002a)

Gunfire lands man in court – … is a member of the Evil Warriors gang which has been involved in continual fighting in the community

NT News (2002b)

Violence drives family out of town … following riots after police shot dead a man last October, sparking months of civil unrest as rival youth gangs embarked on a war for control of the community

NT News (2003)

Man hit with axe in night of mob violence

NT News (2004b)

Robinson (2006: 1) argues that ‘governments manufacture crisis’ as a political end. In the case of Wadeye, he argues that intervention by the Australian Government in 2007 may have had the effect of destabilising organised community interests (primarily the youth groups), creating ‘increased rivalry and sometimes destructive competition’. In my opinion the intervention, and in particular the activities of certain bureaucrats that visited Wadeye did inflame the general
situation and emotions of all residents. However this may also have been conducive to the interests of the youths as they received increased attention and consideration.

**Group Leadership**

A key pre-requisite to be a leader of one of the youth groups is the ability to fight, to think strategically, and to communicate and relate to other members. The leaders, of the main groups at least, are usually well built and aggressive. They are fearless and in the mould of warrior leaders such as Nemarluk, decide on who the enemy is, and implement strategies to gain the upper hand or to retaliate against perceived wrongs. All have very clear perceptions of what they believe to be right or wrong and are working to achieve the best outcome for their group, or overcome any abnormalities. Some are reasonably well educated, some not so, but most appear intelligent. Most of them have spent some time in NT prisons and one particular leader has a prison record, according to a prison guard, that ‘runs for three pages’. In some cases the leaders are notorious and legendary with the NT legal fraternity and prison system. Case Study F provides some details of a prominent leader of one of the groups. The information was gathered from two interviews in prison and discussions held at Wadeye.

**Box 6A: Life History, Case Study F**

Mr K

Mr K is in his late twenties. He is a big man with an imposing presence. For many years he has been regarded as the leader of one of the youth groups (oft termed as ‘gangs’). He prefers to refer to the group as ‘family’. Mr K is well educated having attended boarding school in
Darwin to Year 10 standard. He has been charged by the police on many occasions, usually for assault, and has spent much of the last ten years of his life in prison.

Mr K has a large following of male and female supporters, most who are younger than he is. He is called on, and usually responds, to lead battles against other groups or to intervene in matters of contention. He is rarely involved in routine events in the community and for many years was not even seen enough to be recognisable by non-Indigenous residents (although most have heard his name).

Mr K has a reasonable knowledge of matters related to his estate but does not participate very often in ritual affairs. He regards this as the fault of elders in the community. The elders have often been reluctant, they say, to pass on information of sacred importance to some individuals in case it is used wrongfully. Mr K’s relationship with the other two levels of leadership, the elderly and middle-aged, is terse although noticeably improving as he grows older. On occasions, Mr K’s relationship with the police has also improved and this has generally translated into a better state of community affairs. However it must be said that the situation can deteriorate very rapidly depending on circumstances.

Mr K is regarded as a strong leader by his young followers and many fellow clan members, and they revere his strength of character. However, he is yet to gain credibility in the wider community arena of leadership. This could change, though, if his style becomes more embracing of other factions and peaceful. The other leaders mentioned in later case studies, Mr J and Mr N, have networks of leadership developed particularly through their work
experience, whilst Mr S’s opportunities to construct a leadership base have mainly been restricted to prison or illegal activities.

Case Study G was gathered from discussions and observations of activities of another prominent group leader.

**Box 6B: Life History, Case Study G**

**Mr J**

Mr J might be seen through some eyes as the arch enemy of Mr K. They both have leadership influence over the two most powerful youth groups in Wadeye. However, a closer analysis does reveal many similarities in philosophy and certainly mode of operation.

Mr J is also a large conspicuous man who is seen more around the community than Mr K. He has refined ‘the glare’ of a masterful ‘gang’ leader and is revered by his followers and detested by most of his rivals. Reported to be a fierce fighter, I was rarely able to witness such prowess. Not because Mr J was not present during altercations, but mainly because his rivals would often ‘step down’ prior to blows being thrown, or a further plan of battle would be negotiated. On other occasions, it was because Mr J’s emerging follower-warriors would be more than willing to throw themselves forth into the ‘front line’. It is also a reflection of the afore-mentioned style of battle at Wadeye, that is, ‘attack and retreat’ or ‘thrust and parry’.
Mr J’s upbringing was different to Mr K. He lived many of his early years in buffalo shooting camps; often moving from one place to another. Significantly, this livelihood was conducted by his parents and family some distance from their particular clan estate. Mr J’s father, a strong character in his own right and a very hard worker in his time, particularly in the buffalo industry, is one of the senior leaders of the clan and in most cases fully supports his son who he sees as ‘looking after our mob’. Mr J’s father often uses the term ‘my boys’ to describe the senior leaders of the group with which Mr J is associated.

Mr J had a very basic education. During the five years of research for this thesis he worked for only about three months; most times resting during the day and preparing for the activities that permeate Wadeye night life. During the early 2000s, Mr J and his brothers as a young group were often on the wrong end of beatings from the other group. This began to change in about 2002 as their members became older and physically stronger. They also actively practised their fighting prowess on each other. Their ‘raison d'être’ emerged significantly in 2003 when a brother of the family was killed in an unfortunate altercation with a police officer. Five years later the members still hurt about this loss and at times seek revenge.

Mr J’s primary motivation is to protect his extended family and avenge any wrongdoings against family members. He receives unlimited support from such family, including elderly pensioners, and this includes access to certain resources. At times of heightened battle he is joined by all members; men, women and children, old and young. He has never shown any great inclination to move to his clan estate and this could be because of his requirement for family protection purposes, to be strategically present at Wadeye. Mr J appears very alert to
shifts in power amongst the youth groups particularly as new ones emerge and others strengthen their resources. Mr J’s leadership reflects the existing clan-based hierachical model; but shows little interest in the ceremonial ritual associated. The ‘ritual’ has been re-defined toward other behaviours and symbolism including heavy metal music and studded belts. Nevertheless enormous respect is shown to elders; kin codes of conduct maintained; and ethical mores protected.

Case Study H is about a younger leader who is emerging in notoriety.

**Box 6C: Life History, Case Study H**

**Mr L**

Mr L is the leader of a youth group or ‘gang’ that is not as powerful as the previously mentioned two groups. Nevertheless, the group that he leads has a burgeoning membership of young people generally aged between 13 and 18 years. The group is emerging as a force and may one day challenge the other two groups. The group is a constant concern for the local police and authorities because of their activities in petty crime including the theft of motor vehicles and break and entry.

Motor vehicles are generally stolen at night when the members of the group will clamber on board and career around the community until they run out of fuel or damage the vehicle. The
culprits are always caught and some are removed temporarily to detention centres in Darwin. Mr L has been in such detention centres, particularly the Don Dale Centre, numerous times. The primary purpose of such activities appears to be to gain recognition, status, and to provide a deviant purpose for the membership.

Mr L, who is 23 years of age, has been poorly educated and is almost illiterate. His communication skills with non-Aboriginals are also poor and he has never worked in any of the local community jobs. He is a product of the 1980s and 90s, when the school system at Wadeye and associated values was at its lowest ebb. Unfortunately the result of this is that this young man has little future nor chance of engaging within the intercultural domain.

The group has emerged from within one of the largest clans in the area. This clan has strong, but ageing, leadership and has been attempting to develop their outstation communities and their country. During the period of research, there was a particularly bad time where crime was at a height and conflict was occurring almost every day. In an attempt to remove Mr L and his group from the Wadeye Township, the older leaders approached the council, police and myself to assist. Subsequently most of the young men were taken to two outstations on their land and equipped with tents. Several of the middle-aged leaders from this group accompanied the youngsters and implemented a rigorous daily routine of cleaning up the camp and then going hunting. The impact of this rehabilitation initiative was immediate and a few weeks later, on visiting the group I was able to see a substantial change in attitude. Mr L was much more approachable and upbeat about what was happening.
The initiative, whilst being successful in channelling energy into more fruitful activities, faces significant challenges due to the problem in obtaining forms of work and income for the youngsters. Mr L’s future is clouded as his skills, knowledge and experience compared to the elderly and middle-aged leaders, is severly limited.

Not all of the youth of the Thamarrurr region are members of, or associated with, the youth ‘gangs’. Many regularly attend school, participate in mainstream affairs (including activities such as the Army cadets), are Christians and regularly attend Church and associated youth activities, play sport and generally do not participate in dysfunctional activities. Many have aspirations to complete apprenticeships, become teachers or health workers, and generally contribute to their wider community. Some have completed Year 12 at high school. It would be true to say, however, that the majority of these young people are female. They often live in a state of fear from group harassment and would probably be very happy if the dysfunctionalism of the groups would dissipate.

My research has shown that membership of the youth groups, or otherwise, does not necessarily correlate to the credibility of one’s parents; some group members’s fathers or mothers for instance are mainstays of council hierarchy and decision-making. In some cases though, youths do follow their parents in positive mainstream affairs such as church membership and participation.
Summary and Conclusion

In this chapter, I have described the socio-political structure of the third age grouping and order of male leadership at Port Keats. This age-group and their leadership appear to be engaged in several fields of endeavour that varies depending on individual ambition and factors such as age. These include:

- the pursuit of excitement as a form of ‘entertainment’ (This is particularly pertinent to the younger group members);
- seeking youth group membership as providing a safe haven, a form of protection (with high social capital and low rates of suicide), and a way of obtaining basic resources (particularly food and women);
- developing high social capital;
- the seeking of power and authority by some. This potential outcome appears to be particularly appealing to the older members of the groups;
- satisfying altruistic motivations by some, in particular the oldest and usually the senior leaders of the youth groups, to achieve outcomes that they believe have been succumbed to by their elders. This particularly relates to relationships with the Church and in more recent times, with the Commonwealth and Territory Governments; and
- achieving outcomes that they believe their early predecessors such as Nemarluk were fighting to achieve; that is equal status with non-Aboriginals and liberty.

The leaders of this age-group, as well as the previously described middle-aged and the elderly leadership, all have basically the same ideals and ideological foundation, but their way of expressing it, their *modus operandi*, and their knowledge and skills are different. Nevertheless,
despite considerable angst between the three power groups, they all continue to operate and interact in the milieu of community affairs at Port Keats.

It is evident that the youth groups of Port Keats have particular features and characteristics of their own when compared to mainstream constructs of gangs throughout the world. In addition to ‘normal’ youth gang attributes, they have strong affiliations to kin and country and a strong desire to be recognised positively from within their own society. They have constructed their own subculture, and developed a ‘collective response’, albeit a deviant one on most occasions, in order to resolve contradictions that are present in relation to their own ‘parent’ culture (Cohen 1972: xii). The middle-aged, in conjunction with the elders, have constructed and defined a positive role for their cohort; this third group have defined their own power structure, networks and nodes of leadership, but configured it within a negative worldview. This younger generation has changed the overall leadership model in some ways. Even though the elderly hold power in theory, they appear to struggle at times to control the youth. On occasions, when the youth are on a rampage, the elderly will not intervene. Instead, they may wait until the situation calms. This is often a prudent decision as it may prevent the situation from escalating into a wider issue.

The evidence presented on leadership structures of the elderly and middle-aged depicts nodal and networked patterns. Such disposition carries through to the youth groups as well with leadership being obvious and with strong networked linkages through kin and reciprocity, in Wadeye and beyond.
Certain questions arise with the emergence and ongoing development of the youth groups. Whilst their engagement is primarily negative, it raises the question whether their evolution is a survival mechanism for the wider Port Keats community. Does their dysfunctional status give a focus and reason for the sustainability of not just themselves, but also the wider community? Millions of dollars in aid have now been injected into the community as part of the ‘intervention’ policy of the Federal and Territory Governments. Would the intervention and assistance have been the case if it were a quiet law-abiding town that never received headline news? Are the activities of youth a key factor in maintaining cultural identity and if so, what kind of identity compared to their fathers and grandfathers? Are they out to reject their own culture; or force it to be restructured once again as a survival mechanism? In this regard, there will need to be more scholarship in the future.

The research of some analysts (Hughes 2006; Short 1998; Sullivan 2006; Fleisher 2006) indicates that it is important that the formation of youth associations and gangs should be examined in their micro- and macro-societal contexts. They argue that we need to examine the causes and consequences of gang formation, diversity and change. The development of gangs, embedded within multiple layers of meaning and complexity, might actually provide a positive outcome for society. Marginilised, uneducated, powerless youth are provided with a structure that gives them guidance, maintenance, and meaning in their lives. Such structures are powerful mechanisms that bestow a better quality of life than they had without gang structures. The gang in effect ‘fills the gap’. They are a response to a dysfunctional or meaningless system and provide purposefulness and achievement. With the deterioration of some aspects of the traditional system, they provide an alternate structure that empowers
members’ self-esteem and provide a higher quality of life. Such structures provide room for self-hood and achievement within a hierarchical, organised model.

The evidence outlined in this and previous chapters on the themes expounded so far foreshadows a general model of leadership to be outlined for the Port Keats study. The Conclusion, drawing from the ethnographical material and analyses presented, will proffer a model lending itself to a system of leadership founded on a complex web of family, kinship relations and cultural alliances that has been able to sustain and support individuals and groups in various forms since first contact, and possibly beyond. This system and its various adaptations has enabled survival and fulfillment in an environment that is challenging and often hostile.
Conclusion

Toward a Framework for Analysing and Understanding Indigenous Leadership

Typically, most leaders in Australia are able, during their twilight years, to retire, unwind and enjoy the last period of their life. Several of the Indigenous men that I worked with during my research passed away soon after, but they were still enmeshed in community politics to the day they died. There is no ‘retirement’ for Indigenous leaders; the more they are able to lead and the more they gain respect, the more pressure they are placed under, even when they are old and frail, to lead, support and guide others. It is not necessarily their decision; it is the way things operate in a society bound up in responsibility and the care of others, and the unrelenting maintenance of networks, reciprocity and structure. And the system, often to the surprise of many, is remarkably resilient and keeps producing leaders even though one often hears the remark ‘The old men are gone now; it will never be the same’.

This thesis has explored the conceptualisation and dynamics of Indigenous leadership at Port Keats. I have argued that Indigenous leaders at Port Keats have, since first contact, attempted to, and still do, adjust their system of leadership to that of the dominant culture that is

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257 My senior informants Bernard Jabinee, Felix Bunduck, and Laurence Kulumboort all passed away during the research project. All of these men were still making decisions and guiding others as they virtually lay on their death beds.
unrelenting in its desire to ‘fix’ Indigenous issues and to do so in its own image. The Indigenous polity has strived to accommodate and reshape change in an environment that is forever being modified by political and economic influences from outside.

The leaders and their followers have been able to survive, to this point, by the rigorous nature of their own structure and style of leadership that is able to transform itself, as conditions require. Such resilient and adaptive leadership, founded on dense and complex networks of relationships that enable individualism and authority to emerge, sustains the society as a whole. The thesis, in this regard, builds on Myers’ (1976) proposition that the central paradox of Pintubi political life is the co-existence of hierarchy and egalitarianism, each sustaining the other.

In an ethnographic and historical account, supplemented by life-stories of elderly, middle-aged and younger men, I analyse how the society has been able to respond to various challenges over time. One of the biggest challenges is from within the society itself, as young and restless leaders seek their own position within a community that is characterised by lack of social opportunity and unequal access to basic education, health and employment outcomes.

I argue, and present evidence, that Aboriginal people have been living and operating within a well structured social and governance system in the Port Keats region for a very long time. The evidence details how Aboriginal people have occupied country in the Port Keats region for at least 6,000 years (Stanner 1957; Flood 1967; Gregory 1998) and probably much
longer.\textsuperscript{258} I argue that from earliest recorded encounters with explorers in the early 1800s, there were observable leadership patterns.

Documentation is presented of contact by local Indigenous people with explorers, Wickham, Stokes and party, in 1839. This encounter, violent though it was, presented evidence that the attack launched by the Indigenous people of this area was organised and appeared to be led by prominent men. In the same chapter, I explain that when Augustus Gregory explored the area in 1855 he was not attacked and saw only a few people. The evidence I present in this case, offers an explanation for this ‘lack of action’, that by this stage various epidemics had swept across the Australian continent severely reducing the population in the area. Nevertheless, the Aboriginal population survived. By the 1870s local Aboriginal groups were aware of the settlement further south by cattlemen, and moved to engage. By the turn of the century some groups, led by their relevant senior men, were either living near or working for the cattle pioneers.

I show that many other encounters in the broader region resulted in antagonism and violence. Examples are given of the killings in the Pine Creek, Daly River and other areas from the 1870s to the 1900s. Such violence set a template for much of the engagement closer to Port Keats (1905 Bradshaw killings; 1908 Fitzmaurice encounter; 1931 Nemarluk and the Red Band of Warriors; 1932 Cook and Stevens killings). Though this engagement was violent, it is

\textsuperscript{258}William Stanner, Muta and Nym Bunduck excavated the archaeological sites, Yada and Nyik, in the 1950s. At that time, Yada was still in use by local people as a camping site, a place of refuge from attack, a site of significance, and as a hunting and gathering processing site. Carbon dating at the time and later verification by Flood and Gregory, presented the dating of 6,000 years.
relevant to the leadership theme. Firstly, it indicated to the colonists in the Territory and elsewhere that Aboriginal groups from the region would not submissively accept domination and that they were prepared to act in guerilla-type responses. Secondly, it shows that the encounters, albeit violent in many cases, were well-considered engagements led by men with significant leadership endorsement and followers.

Stanner, on arrival with the Catholic missionaries in 1935, documented local groups led by senior men and it was through these men that the missionaries negotiated occupation and local affairs. The Falkenbergs in the 1950s observed and documented similar groups and leadership patterns. Such observations indicate that from a state of almost extinction, the Port Keats population had regenerated in number and had a social system that was resilient, sustainable and operational under a wide range of circumstances. More particularly, the system when the missionaries arrived was continuing to produce leaders and social cohesion.

A more peaceful form of engagement, with the Catholic missionaries, is also described. The Indigenous leadership during this period generally responded in a cooperative manner coopting and fostering positive relationships for both parties. In subsequent years during World War 2 and post-war, this climate of peaceful co-existence continued with many leaders enhancing their status and authority by obtaining work and contacts outside of the Port Keats region so extending the already established leadership system.

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259 The missionaries’ initial establishment site, Wentek Nganayi, was beset by problems including a lack of water. The missionaries were later (1939) taken by clan leaders to better country where they established the present site of Wadeye.
An explanation is provided of the types of government intervention policy applied in the region following the mission, and how the Indigenous leadership responded and managed the changing situation. Not all ‘intervention’ has come from outside; angry youth dynamics and relationships followed by media hype have placed additional pressure on the leadership of the elderly and middle-aged.

The ethnography leads to the development of a conceptual model of the leadership structure and system that exists in the Port Keats region – I refer to this as a nodal, networked model of leadership based on a system of deference. Informed by the evidence, this model goes some way to explaining how the system at Port Keats works and survives. I then present a heuristic framework that may assist in analysing Indigenous leadership systems, with possible extension and usage in other regions of Australia. This framework suggests possibilities for better understanding of interaction between Indigenous and non-Indigenous leadership models.

**The Research Problem and Evidence**

The central research problematic posed at the beginning of this thesis was how Indigenous people of the Port Keats region conceptualise leadership today in the context of post-colonial Australia and in the context of a culturally-based worldview in which leadership appears unchanging. I was also concerned with the problem of how they construct and structure a social reality that enables them to successfully operate in an intercultural sense. Research to date has identified Indigenous leadership as being ‘non-existent’ in some cases, quiescent in others, and alive and well in some parts of Australia, often depending on academic
interpretation. Few commentators though, have been able to delineate the true context of
Indigenous leadership today, nor how it is produced and exercised.

In order to analyse the contemporary situation, I also needed to examine whether Western and
other interpretations of leadership were able to adequately explain Indigenous Australian
examples. In Chapter One, I devote considerable detail to the wider view of leadership and
how it is generally applied to Indigenous situations. Research on Western notions of
leadership is diverse and debate ensues about the functions, qualities and attributes of leaders.
Moreover, these functions of leadership appear overly orientated toward the role of leaders as
change agents in Western organisations and companies.

I explored the relationship between power and leadership, noting Foucault’s (1984: 943)
analysis that power relations are best examined by ‘studying the methods and techniques used
in different institutional contexts’. I utilise this technique with regard to relationships with the
Church and government. I have also been influenced by Foucault’s argument that power is
omnipresent, forever ebbing and flowing between individuals and groups.

Subsequently, I reviewed the anthropological literature about Indigenous leadership focusing
on hunter and gatherer societies. I show that Australian perspectives have often been guided
by historical influences such as the European Enlightenment and colonisation. I argue that
policies of governments, ranging from extermination to self-determination, have influenced
how the dominant society perceives and determines Indigenous leadership. Opinions on
whether there is leadership and governance vary and I demonstrate that despite this extensive
analysis, there still are inadequacies in the literature that explains leadership as it is observed in the Port Keats region.

I was concerned in the first instance to give an account of the historical, contextual, experiential and social aspects of the individual in Port Keats life. This, I anticipated would lead to an understanding of how Indigenous people from this region order, understand, and manipulate their environment – and how the environment affects the society. In Chapter Two, I devote considerable detail to a background of Port Keats and the people in order to illustrate the external features of their experience from past to the present. I describe the social and political environment in which my research was conducted, and I articulate where the Port Keats people have come from and where they are today. This chapter explored the landscape and how history has brought change and fluctuation to the region and the people. I detail recorded first contacts with explorers and other venturers as these intrusions provided the people with the first challenges to their leadership structure. I provide an account of what anthropologists such as Stanner and the Falkenbergs found during the 1930s through to the 1970s. These accounts provide a template for an analysis and comparison for what I found from my own ethnography. Considerable insight is provided into cultural practices including how the young are nurtured and moulded into leaders.

This comprehensive analysis of the people and their region was necessary, I believe, to provide the data in order to compare the Port Keats scenario with mainstream leadership theory. Elements of the culture such as language, alliances, kinship and ceremony are scrutinised in order to provide a configuration of how relationships work. I found that
objectified Indigenous law is indoctrinated by rites of passage, a system of ‘growing up’ the young, and a process and responsibility for ‘looking after’ others that follows from one generation to the next. Each individual experiences the Law and this leads to a model of hierarchy and authority that operates in the region and beyond. This background also gives an indication of what the Port Keats people did in order to survive as an entity. It is only with this background that I feel it possible to present where their leadership system is today.

This leads to specific accounts in Chapter Three of how certain groups responded to the challenges within their own histories. Intrusions to the region by traders, explorers, miners and pastoralists provided new opportunities for contact. Disease and dramatic demographic changes almost certainly resulted in leadership readjustment and transformation. I provide an account of how the notorious Aboriginal outlaw, Nemarluk and his Red Band of Warriors in the early 1930s were initially engaging regularly with outsiders, only to then wage a war of intrigue and violence against them that would not only go into the history books, but also provide a model of engagement that is still referred to today, especially by the young. These articulations of early contact are important because they set the scene for what underpins following events. In some cases, for example during the pastoral and mission eras, a form of ‘selective’ leadership was devised by the station owners and administrators in order to propagate a preferred system of hierarchy and possibly assimilation.

Historically this brought the people and their leadership to a crossroads of possible fragmentation as an entity. However, driven by public concern for emancipation, the government, with a new governmental interest in Indigenous affairs, invited various religious
organisations to intervene in parts of the NT that were seen to be at risk. In Chapter Four I explore the arrival of the mission in the early 1930s and how they attracted Indigenous people back to the area, who were keen to engage in the resources, safety and opportunities that the missionaries proffered. People brought their children to be ‘educated’ in the sanctuary of the dormitories from the early 1940s and I argue that this action was a turning point as it diminished the role and responsibility of the Indigenous leader.

The superintendent and authorities at the mission from this point took over many critical life-decisions such as the management of food, disputes and even issues such as marriage-partners. But then, World War 2 abruptly intervened and the situation changed once again; some Indigenous people were enlisted in the armed forces, troops arrived at Port Keats and the sisters left, at least for a while. Indigenous people had experiences in mainstream life that gave them a ‘taste’ of independence, autonomy, and also a desire to determine their own lives. The mission sisters returned after the War, and toward the latter part of the 1940s the dormitories became to be a feature of life at Port Keats, thus introducing a new level of education, surveillance, authority, and some might argue, indoctrination.

World and Australian events in many ways were impacting on life in the Port Keats region and indirectly on their leadership. Chapter Four outlines such turn of events and also how Indigenous perceptions of control, decision-making and ultimately leadership structures were changing. It explores adaptations and transformations that occurred to accommodate the new order. The people and their leaders responded in various ways. Many engaged at different
levels and the concept of ‘going out’ or ‘going away’ to work on cattle stations or other forms of work became prominent.

Individual stories and accounts of what happened as Aboriginal people adapted are featured in this chapter in order to give a personalised and detailed description from the people themselves. Men and women, with their children, went away to work on cattle stations; others went to the military, crocodile shooting or working on the new frontier type ventures that emerged. But eventually things changed again and people came back. The War ended and the cattle industry came upon hard times. Aboriginal people went on to rations, welfare, and then award wages brought the ‘cattle days’ to an end. This chapter explains the ‘initiations’ that occurred into a wider world, and how leaders responded with even more complex network building.

In the 1960s an era of ‘welfare’ impacted on Aboriginal people across the NT. Chapter Four also focuses on this policy and its effects, and then the rapid roll-out of successive changes culminating in the policy of self-determination commencing in 1974. Initially moulded on the ‘village’ concept of Melanesia, councils emerged, influenced still by the mission bureaucracy, and then this system collapsed amidst accusations of inappropriate funding and unrepresentative governance. Notably, I demonstrate that such a governance structure did not fit with the community’s notion and real world of a nodal and network based leadership with multiple leaders. The community erupted into violence, Northern Territory Government ministers intervened and this was tempered with the people’s response of *mulunu* or cultural resolution. This is often described by some locals as a ‘fresh start’. Individual and groups of
people at Port Keats began to reconstruct methods of engagement, based on their mental construct of permanence and continuity tempered by change, and created a ‘new approach’ based on foundational principles.

In Chapter Five I describe how the middle-aged and older males at Port Keats have been developed by their societal system to become leaders. I also detail my observations about a phenomenon that re-emerged in the late 1990s known locally as Thamarrurr. It was led by decision-making processes instigated by elderly and middle-aged male leaders. I argue that this culturally-based governance philosophy has led to enhanced local decision-making, authority and control. My discussion of the ideological underpinnings of this concept provides evidence of the Indigenous people building on the nodal clan-based leadership and networked society concept, and effectively determining their own representative and decision-making process. I show how such a re-structuring of local governance is another form of adaptation to change.

I describe how challenges to Thamarrurr by the youth of Port Keats ‘tested’ the new multi-dimensional socio-political structure to exercise its authority and autonomy. I explain how the youth groups with strong alliances, leadership and territorial conceptualisation, then took their aggression to another level. Again, the leadership adjusted, took stock, and began to ‘devise’ a movement of going back to country in order to take the pressure off the community as a whole. I show how there was a re-grouping of the decision-making process and a considered and conscious reaction to outside political intrusions. However, in some cases this resulted in the successive burn-out of some individuals and subsequent implementation of mechanisms to
spread the load. I argue that such challenges and subsequent responses have enabled the Thamarrurr-type ideology to provide a way forward whilst consciously addressing the ‘two-world’ scenario.\textsuperscript{260} It has actually meant, amongst other things, that there is now a clearer and more defined identification of leaders.

In Chapter Six, I describe in more detail, how a third order of leadership began to emerge in the 1990s based on a mix of Western musical influences and minority gang constructs, but fundamentally framed within an Indigenous Port Keats ideology. I describe and analyse the systems of these younger Aboriginal age-groups, in the process attempting to get an understanding of the reason for their manifestation and how they have influenced the Indigenous leadership paradigm. Instead of utilising a dysfunctional or deficit model of analysis, I attempt to objectify the presence of these groups as a positive representation of inter- and intra-societal political action.

A key aim of this thesis has been to demonstrate how the people at Port Keats have been able to re-cast their social and mental constructs, and model of leadership, in order to survive and adapt. This has included the creation, identification and delegation of middle-class leaders and negotiators within the non-Indigenous domain. Such individuals are identified early and embark on a training regime that is over-sighted by more senior leaders. I have given a cultural account of how concepts such as ‘looking after’, ‘looking over’, ‘holding’ (Myers 1976), ‘looking back’ and having responsibility for country have provided a foundation for ‘being’ and ‘leading’. Such a foundation rather than undermining a person’s ability to engage

\textsuperscript{260} ‘Two-world’ in the sense that there are perceived, by some, to be separate Aboriginal and a non-Aboriginal cultural domains.
and fit into the intercultural domain, has actually provided an endorsement and strength to adaptive mechanisms. I argue that this preparation and resilience has enabled some Indigenous residents, particularly during difficult times, to elaborate and embark on further rites de passage and ‘go away’ to school, to the Church, or for work.

I have offered an analysis of how, amidst a mire of political interference from the State, and at a time when Aboriginal youth in the region are perceived to be in a state of revolution, there is actually order as well as a fortitude and determination amongst the majority of men and women at Port Keats. They are determined to forge a life based on ideals that in many ways are similar to other Australians, but in others, are distinctly local and Indigenous. Further, I have shown that leaders perform their roles and others follow. I have illustrated how the guiding mental construct and model of social relations that I have described, provides a theory of political engagement and adaptation of how Indigenous people interpret and organise their on-going engagement.

Myers (1976: 556) argued that in an attempt by the Pintubi to ‘impose on time and change an image of persistence’, they would ultimately fail. However, my research suggests that thirty years on at Port Keats, this is not necessarily the case. The Port Keats groups have resiliently metamorphosed their model of leadership to incorporate change whilst still maintaining a cosmological view that privileges the legitimising force of continuity. This exploration has been conducted in light of opinions that suggest Indigenous society and leadership is fluid and flexible, fluctuating, context-driven, multi-dimensional, and subject to negotiation. These characteristics as described are true in many ways but ignore several other critical dimensions
of leadership which rather than weakening the structure of Indigenous leadership, in many cases actually strengthens it. Flexible, pragmatic, and shared leadership has provided a scheme for coping with and managing pressure and stress.

Evidence has been presented in this thesis, which has made it clear that current perspectives on Indigenous leadership are often based on misunderstandings, misinformation, and power paradigms that favour the view of a dispossessed people with no leaders, and no hope. The purpose of this research has been to delineate and articulate what leadership actually looks like as a nodal networked and ‘working’ entity in the Port Keats region. I argue that it has metamorphosed over time in response to outside intrusions, influences and interventions. Its agency, outcomes and how it gets things happening are exposed as a pattern to which people in the community generally conform, but which often causes consternation to outsiders.

In providing a conceptualisation of what the leadership looks like at Port Keats, I moved toward a model that describes and analyses Indigenous leadership today. I had earlier, in Chapter One, explained various leadership paradigms including situational, transformational, enabling, networked, transactional, charismatic, participative, collaborative, distributed, and nodal and so forth. Elements and characteristics of many of these leadership theories can be seen in the Port Keats model of leadership. For that matter, the same conclusion might be reached when one examines other cultural models. The leadership qualities of looking after others, showing care and respect for others, the ability to achieve consensus and so on, that I have found at Port Keats, can also apply in other societies. Similarly the notion of going away to gain experience, work in another environment, and meet and engage with other people is
often seen as a favourable move in many cultures. A key outcome of this research therefore, is not so much the difference between Port Keats leadership and other cultural forms when it comes to fundamental leadership attributes, qualities, and characteristics; but in many instances, the similarities.

The evidence from the Port Keats case study outlined above, confirms certain key leadership outcomes. They are that from first recorded documentation, Indigenous leadership has:

- continued to prevail over time;
- developed a resilience that emerges even at times of enormous stress;
- evidenced strong elements of tangibility, sustainability and socially embeddedness;
- evidenced leaders who are accountable within the system;
- shown an adaptability and flexibility according to the situation and to outside stimuli;
- provided an inbuilt protective core of values including the notion of individuality, groupness, and equality;
- shown an ability to respond to disputation and grievances with considered responses; and
- demonstrated relevance to the Indigenous populace, as a workable system.

I argue that there are reasons for such continuity amidst change and that there are foundational elements underpinning such resilience. This leads to articulation of the model of leadership.
The Leadership Model at Port Keats

To aid this argument, and to move toward a theoretically and ethnographically informed model of Indigenous leadership, I utilise elements of the approach of Stoker (1998) to model governance ‘networks’ and also Castells’s (2000) and Burris, Drahos and Shearing’s (2005) analysis of ‘nodal’ forms of governance related to network theory. Such use of nodal conceptualisation to describe Indigenous leadership emerged during discussions I had with Diane Smith in 2007 and subsequently from further discussions I had with groups at Port Keats. I will specifically use it to illustrate the regional leadership model in the Port Keats region.

In his descriptions of ‘networks’ Stoker (1998: 17–28) identifies a ‘shifting’ pattern in styles of governing. Much of the difference relates to processes; the result is similar. The essence of governance, Stoker (1998: 17) argues, is its focus on ‘governing mechanisms which do not rest on recourse to the authority and sanctions of government’. He proposes that, amongst other things, governance is about ‘autonomous self-governing networks of actors’ (Stoker 1998: 18). Such networks are driven by the ‘self-interest’ of members, but Stoker argues that a ‘significant degree of autonomy’ can be maintained, while at the same time government provides a ‘steering’ role (Stoker 1998: 24). Networks enable coordination, relationships to be maintained, access to resources, and information to flow. Castells (2000) recognises nodes as the sites where networks intersect. Nodes, according to Burris, Drahos and Shearing (2005: 37), are the places where the flow of information and communication is translated into action.
Leaders at Port Keats develop networks of relationships in various ways. Some are inter-family and kin related that branch out to link families within their clan and other clans. Other networks are religico-ritual related and link ceremonial organisers and performers. Others are land related and have political connotations of a higher order. Others are networks between friends; those who went to school together, grew up together, or went through ceremony together and these networks enhance and enrich those based on structural affiliations. As Sutton (1978: 13) argued with relation to networks in Cape York Peninsula, there is ‘no way of defining a network relevant for all purpose’.

Evidence presented here articulates how leadership can be individually enhanced, extended, and taken to another level in various ways. Such ‘big-man’ enhancement can occur when leaders:

- develop relationships beyond their respective clan grouping;
- nurture individual qualities such as generosity and ‘caring for others’ beyond the norm;
- acquire skills (such as ceremonial acumen) ‘outside’ of their normal sphere of operations;
- acquire prestige from other forms (such as relationships with ‘power’ groups e.g. police); and
- acquire knowledge, skills, and relationships in the non-Indigenous domain (e.g. the army).
As outlined, there are set fundamental cultural values at the core of this community. These values focus particularly on a combination of egalitarianism and individual autonomy. Such values influence both behavior and social organisation. A clear factor in the Indigenous conception of leadership in the community is founded on the concept of ‘looking after’ and ‘caring for’ other people, country and community. Such values have had considerable stability and resilience over time. So, while individual leaders can enhance their leader status, their power is limited to their domain of expertise and accumulated degree of trust. The essential principles of egalitarianism and individualism act as forms of counter balance if an individual leader becomes too dominant and overbearing.

The argument I have presented here is of a relatively constant underlying conceptual structure that informs leadership, characterised by a nodal network. I will now present my views on the important bases of leadership at Port Keats, how it is nurtured, how it responds to crisis, and how things have changed over time. I will refer to this as leadership by deference.

Whilst the core values have not changed much over time, the bases of leadership have, in response to changing circumstances. Leadership at Port Keats involves deference. Leaders receive deference or compliance, not necessarily because of force or dominance (although on occasions this may occur) enacted by the leaders, but more in terms of esteem, regard, respect, civility and perhaps, stable governance. When one accepts or promotes another person’s leadership, they are agreeing to accept or defer to that person for certain kinds of decision-

261 I thank Professor Stephen Cornell for bringing to my attention the applicability and relevance of this concept of deference within the leadership context at Wadeye.
making or in certain areas. A person might defer to another when they require advice or wisdom or when something of value is at stake. Once they stop deferring to that person, then that person’s leadership is challenged, seriously under threat, or is extinguished. Key bases of deference that I have identified are as follows:

- **Credentials or evidence of authority** – At Port Keats, credentials are achieved through clan status, age, initiation, ceremonial knowledge and similar means. It can also be enhanced by ‘going away’ to work somewhere else or to experience another life situation. In such cases, you achieve a certain stature and right to deference by virtue of your own actions in securing specialised knowledge through socially prescribed means. As a result of this, people look to you for leadership by way of credentials that provide the basis for confidence. Occasionally such credentials are symbolically exhibited; such as carrying a woomera.

- **Issue** – Particular issues require certain types of leadership and leaders. If the issue is related to ceremony then ceremonial leaders will take the lead and others will defer to those leaders. Generally, the relevant clan leaders will decide on most clan-related and wider issues. However, there are times when ‘ownership’ of an issue can lead certain types of deferral. There are also times when the clan leaders may defer to someone who may have more knowledge related to a specific issue. On several occasions I witnessed the most senior leaders of the clans regularly defer to the leadership of a non-Indigenous Town Clerk, who they had confidence in, with regard to certain political and management issues. On other occasions, the same leaders steadfastly refused to defer to the wishes of a Northern Territory Minister and in later years, a Federal Minister over issues they felt were their (the leaders) responsibility. On
another occasion, senior men of a clan made a clan-based decision, then were challenged by more junior clan members who felt that they had ‘ownership’ of that issue. The senior leaders deferred to the wishes of the junior men on this occasion. The relevance and importance of a specific issue to certain individuals or groups, may override ‘normal’ leadership patterns or status. The substance of an issue can sometimes determine deferment.

- **Personal qualities and skills** – Certain qualities such as integrity, fairness, trustworthiness, concern for others, generosity, humility, vision and good judgement are revered as desirable in good leaders at Port Keats. Followers look for these qualities and give deference to such leaders in response – if the attributes are maintained over time. Both men and woman, during interviews, referred to some male leaders as being ‘a good man’. If a leader becomes too dominant, overbearing, greedy or arrogant, then the leader may be challenged openly or followers may just ignore or turn away from that person’s leadership.

- **External authority** – During the mission and pastoral eras, and to a certain extent today (perhaps termed the ‘local government era’), certain individuals were selected by those in authority to act as leaders. On occasions, the elders have selected a certain group, for example, the middle-aged men or women to act in certain areas. They received or receive a certain amount of deference from those they lead. In these cases, someone else made the decision that a certain person moves into a position receiving deference – that is, a position of leadership.

- **Resource control** – In this thesis, I have written about people, usually senior men, who are able to access and control certain resources. These resources may be material
goods or they may be the ability to perform or carry out certain functions. Such leaders represent a node within the networked system that may have control of certain assets. Examples may include access to good hunting country (they may give other groups permission to hunt), control of substances (for example love potion), access to items of importance (for example bamboo for making spears or certain ochres), access to transportation (they may have a reliable vehicle), and the knowledge of and ability to perform ceremonial functions (such as the ability to expertly play didgeridoo and sing songs). Some of the desired resources in contemporary situations may take the form of drugs or alcohol. By being a leadership node in the network in this way, an individual gives some people certain assets that persuade other people to defer to them. They become leaders because that have access to these assets and other people need these assets or in some way depend on them.

- **Persuasion by performance** – Certain leaders are able to perform in an accepted manner and achieve the admiration of others. These performances may be in a cultural setting, in a mainstream situation (such as when politicians or bureaucrats visit) or both. By performing well, and being perceived to do a ‘good job’, others may be persuaded to follow them or defer to them in certain areas or situations.

- **Situation** – In the past, people at Port Keats relied on those with specialised expertise in order to survive and sustain themselves. Other hunters would show deference to a particular hunter, for example, that was an expert at obtaining game. Others would show deference, in appropriate situations, to a person who could expertly sing or perform at ceremonies. The same applies in contemporary situations; people will follow and show deferment to those who have expertise or skills in a certain field. In
contemporary life, many of the fields have been extended – particularly to situations that require interaction with outsiders.

- **Fear and protection** – I have provided illustrations of how in the past, certain leaders who were fearless fighters were able to persuade others to follow their cause. Those that followed, in some cases, feared for their own lives either from an outside source or from the leader, if they did not follow him. I have also provided illustrations of the violent nature of some of today’s youth groups who are also able to muster fear on occasions. Some people yearn for protection of some kind and they may defer to others that are able to provide that protection.

The leadership may entail the involvement of one or more of these bases of deference. It is debatable as which one is most effective and often it may depend on the situation. For example at times of conflict, a person may immediately defer to a leader who is a recognised fighter. At times of peace, an individual may more likely defer to a leader who has good oratory skills and performs well in the public arena. Sometimes it may include the involvement of more than one base of deference. For example, a very effective leader may utilise most of, or all of the bases. Bases of deference may change over time. A leader, who people follow because he is able to provide good protection, may get old and no longer be able to fight as well. That leader may then lean more toward the control of resources in order to get people to defer to him. The bases of deference and comments on their necessity and sustainability for leadership to exist and continue are illustrated in the following table:
## Table 7A: Bases of Leadership Deference

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Basis of deference</th>
<th>Necessary for leadership?</th>
<th>Sufficient to sustain leadership?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Credentials or evidence of authority</td>
<td>Yes – few, if any, individuals make it to leadership positions without cultural credentials.</td>
<td>Not in all situations especially those that require engagement with ‘outsiders’ (such as bureaucrats).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Issue</td>
<td>Yes – in the main, people will generally defer to appropriate leaders over most issues. There are occasions, if an individual or group strongly feels they ‘own’ an issue, and then others (including the leaders) may defer.</td>
<td>No – issues may enable leaders to show their leadership qualities at times, and this is important – however other bases are required to sustain it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal qualities and skills</td>
<td>Yes – qualities such as integrity, humility, vision, trustworthiness and ability to manage conflict are seen as important.</td>
<td>No – one still requires another base such as credentials to underpin their leadership claim.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>External authority</td>
<td>Not always – but it assists in contemporary situations if one is appointed to a certain position (eg member of council).</td>
<td>No – one also requires other bases of deference to be effective. It can, in some situations, also render a person ‘tainted’ as a leader because of perceived bias.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resource control</td>
<td>No – but assists in the process. Access to resources may increase once one has achieved deference by other means.</td>
<td>No – but in a society that has low socio-economic conditions, it can be important at least in the short to medium term.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persuasion by performance</td>
<td>Yes – poor performance may limit an individual’s rise in the broader leadership scene. It may restrict his leadership base to within his own clan.</td>
<td>No – other bases are also required to sustain leadership in the longer term. However, in a multi-cultural environment, it is increasingly seen as important.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Situation</td>
<td>Yes – the society at Port Keats values those who are ‘experts’ or skilled in</td>
<td>No – it ensures deference in certain situations only. However, some individuals</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
particular fields and will defer to them if the situation is appropriate. may be multi-skilled in various situations where leadership is required.

| Fear and protection | No – but within the youth groups it may progress an individual’s claim as a leader in the short to medium term. | No – over time a leader who is able to respond to fear only will eventually be trumped by other leaders who have the other bases of deference. |

The influence of the bases of deference has changed over time. For instance, credentials (as I explained in the chapter about elderly leaders) could be enhanced by ‘going away’ to work on pastoral properties or other forms of experience. The opportunities in this regard diminished particularly during the mid-1970s onwards (unless one argues that going to prison in the case of younger people is a credential base). Prior to the mid-1970s, certain men, because of their work as stockmen, could also meet and engage with leaders from other language groups. By participating in their ceremonies and activities, the visitors gained prestige, and credentials, for when they returned home. They could also call on their friends for assistance as required (for example during ceremonies).

The types and dispersal of certain resources has also changed. Previously the cultural value of being a prominent player in the nanthi kulu exchange system could gain considerable leadership credibility. Nowadays credibility may be more likely to be achieved by having a transportation resource, namely a vehicle or funds to be able to charter a plane.

262 The importance of ‘going away’ for positive experience has in recent times been revisted. A number of young men have been given the opportunity to live in Victoria for an extended period to experience a variety of educational and work experiences.
Previously youth would have to work their way through the system to gain leadership credentials. Today, although some still do, others gain prestige or notoriety through their ability to fight or engage in conflict. One may argue, though, that such deferral may not be sustainable in the longer term unless one achieves leadership status through other bases. The challenges by the youth of Port Keats, to the Indigenous leadership model, during forthcoming years will be interesting in this regard. I tentatively propose that the youth groups are, in their own construction, an adaptive element of the Port Keats leadership system. They are, after all, a ‘training ground’ for group-based activities that foster group loyalty, total participation and adherence to the group’s principles. They also have strict principles when it comes to deference with the youth group. This may explain why the older and middle-aged leaders, on some occasions, will sit back and watch events unfold. When events take a turn toward a more potentially dangerous outcome, they will intervene, usually, in cooperation with the police.

The interesting aspect of adaptation to change that has occurred already is the delegation by elders to the middle-aged leaders. This process may continue, possibly in other forms, such as delegation to the youth (for some situations). This, of course, will depend on relevant responsibility being undertaken by the youth. Such deferment could possibly be made by the older men, comfortable that they retain the ultimate authority that comes from cultural knowledge, and an understanding of the leadership system as a whole. As demonstrated, the strength of the system so far has been its flexibility. It adapts by allowing different bases of deference to be favoured at various times and in response to different needs, while still retaining both the underlying cultural values and the centrality in the leadership system of knowledge of the cultural system and its ceremonial manifestations.
The system of leadership is resilient probably because of a willingness to bend the bases of leadership to fit certain circumstances. Such changes in emphasis on particular bases of leadership has been achieved, comfortable that both cultural knowledge and good performance remain constant. This flexibility protects the underlying values and the leadership system as a whole by allowing altered responses to changing circumstances. In other words, surface flexibility protecting underlying continuity.

The nodal, networked leadership model based on deference presented here further builds on what early anthropologists such as Stanner and the Falkenbergs observed and recorded. It also expands on and explains how current Indigenous leadership enables a collective response to ‘outside’ parties. It enables an explanation of how, as members of a wider Australian cultural environment that impacts on their leadership potential and style, Aboriginal leaders at Port Keats are able to robustly deal with change whilst retaining continuity.

The depth of ethnographic data and analyses set out in this thesis, now leads me to propose a possible heuristic framework that, I would argue, enables us to better comprehend the full form and ongoing resilience of Indigenous leadership in the Port Keats region.

**A Heuristic Framework for Analysing Indigenous Leadership**

People attempt to construct meaningful lives with whatever material they have available to them. It is the task of the anthropologist to try to understand such ingenuity. In order to achieve this, I present the following heuristic research framework outlining areas that need to
be considered when analyzing and assessing forms of Indigenous leadership. It contains various interlocked components that can be influenced, or not, by intercultural factors. Others when searching for models of Indigenous leadership could usefully utilise these components to explore leadership in a particular area.

**Cultural Foundations**

Indigenous cultural beliefs and practices underlie perceptions of being today, as in the past. They are fundamentally grounded on the right of the individual to make certain decisions with a tendency toward egalitarianism. However, depending on factors such as resources, environment, and opportunity, there emerge systems of leadership and power which are reproduced. Indigenous religious philosophy and practice reinforce such societal control mechanisms both over, and by, individual leaders.

**Historical Development**

Relevant historical development and colonial contact data provide a platform to analyse how a particular Indigenous leadership has responded to challenge, change, and in some cases, oppression. As Moore (1967: 486) observes, ‘The assumption that social and cultural continuity do not require explanation obliterates the fact that both have to be created anew in each generation, often with great pain and suffering’. The past illuminates the present in Port Keats leadership.
**Economic Influences**

Economic structures reinforce societal belief systems and cultural norms. External economic change can destroy, or weaken, particular societies; in some cases, the society can respond and survive. Nodal networked leadership within a kin relational social system contains the capacity to transform itself in order to positively respond to economic challenges. In either case, the internal and intercultural dialogue involved illuminates understanding of such dynamics. A good example of this in Port Keats was the introduction of ‘sit-down money’ or unemployment benefits. Some may argue that such economic influence has weakened leadership in such Indigenous communities and made some aspects of leadership irrelevant. This thesis has proven that shared nodal leadership is often more resilient and often innovative in such changing economic conditions.

**Political Influences**

Political pressure to re-incorporate or reform certain cultural practices may come from the dominant order; it might come from another Indigenous group or polity. Policy change, such as the ‘intervention’ policies of governments might seriously override and erode Indigenous leadership in particular regions. However, strong foundational networked leadership appears to be able to adapt and engage at both an internal and intercultural level. Analysis of such power interaction provides information on leadership resilience, malleability and persistence; but also of radical innovation which may not immediately be seen as ‘positive’ by either the Indigenous or non-Indigenous societies. Some groups, such as the Port Keats model described, have retained and reshaped cultural political systems and concepts in order to move forward.
Ecological Influences

A theoretically informed approach must also engage with ecological dimensions. Most Indigenous groups in Australia have had some form of ecological change thrust upon them. The extent of change and the societal impact varies. At Port Keats, recent deforestation for the development of a gas pipeline has created some inter-clan dissent.\(^{263}\) Such interaction between small-scale societies and the physical substratum can cause reverberations in leadership modes. Valuable insights into leadership dynamics and agency are provided by how leadership responds at such times of stress and anxiety.

A descriptive analysis of the ‘ecology of leadership’ can also be made of the respective local cultural environment and modes of Indigenous Leadership model operational in the region. In the Port Keats example, I have examined culturally defined stages of life development including childhood, and transition to adulthood and subsequently development as leaders. Local descriptors of leadership and followers understanding have been articulated within their intercultural contexts. Local language enables the accumulation and transmission of concepts such as leadership. In the Port Keats case, for example, the notion of ‘accepting responsibility’, ‘looking after’, ‘looking over’, and ‘working for’ are fundamental conceptions of leadership at Port Keats. Such concepts can be compared to mainstream definitions of leadership, providing a guide to the extent of conceptual divergence or otherwise. Finally, this thesis has explored the extent of change and continuity that has occurred, and the central role played by individual leaders and sets of leaders in redefining and reshaping changes, and making innovations which have credibility and legitimacy with their followers.

\(^{263}\) The deforestation in this case was sanctioned by the majority of the clan. However some members have expressed concerns and this pressure is being felt by the leaders.
Figure 7A: An Indigenous Leadership Heuristic Framework

(Ivory 2008)
Summary and Conclusion

I have reached three main conclusions in the analyses, description of the Port Keats model of leadership and then construction of the heuristic research framework. First, I argue, by pursuing a cultural account of how Indigenous leadership in the Port Keats region is essentially structured into nodal networks, that family, kinship relationships and cultural alliances, as well as land-ownership and knowledge-based systems remain, key societal foundations for leadership. This is even though, on occasions, older men sometimes withhold religious knowledge from younger men. Such a system sustains and supports the individual in a complex web of co-reliant social institutions. It enables each individual and their wider social group to meet various life challenges and essentially survive. These networks are built around relationships, land, cultural alliances, knowledge-based systems and to a lesser degree through shared histories, values, experience, and friendship.

Further, I conclude that some individuals, through inherited rights and responsibilities to their family, clan and this wider social group, acquire knowledge, reputation and ultimately authority to operate in leadership roles. Such leadership roles may vary in terms of responsibilities, influence and power. Some individuals, for instance may construct a role cognisant to a relatively small group. Others might do it on a larger scale. Rarely does such responsibility lapse. It might diminish due to old age or bad health but as Patrick Dodson (1998) argues:
For Aboriginal leaders, the social and moral obligation that comes with community leadership is life-long. Those who lead, who have authority, must care and look after those who come behind.

Ultimately, there are influential nodes of leadership created which are based on these inter-connecting networks of relationships. By unwrapping these layers of relationships and networks and identifying respective nodes, I argue that one can actually ‘see’ the leadership construct and see its enactment and performance.

Secondly, I believe that the people of the region have been able to adapt and transform this leadership construct in order to interact with ever-changing conditions in the socio-cultural environment. Such adaptation, based on individual world-view, interpretations and understandings, may result in accurate constructs of the ‘Other’ and subsequently, favourable and legitimate relationships. At other times, the results may be skewed and relationships mismatched. Evidence suggests that when adequate knowledge transfer occurs, and enough time is allowed for cultural alignment, then the greater chance there is for positive relationships and outcomes at both societal and leadership level.

Thirdly, I have demonstrated that such a conceptualisation of leadership has not only been able to generally adapt to the socio-cultural environment, but has been able, in many cases, to get things happening and enable groups to endure rapid change. Leaders have led, followers have followed, and people have engaged and constructed a place in Australian society, albeit one that is disadvantaged and difficult for many. In getting things done, the agency of nodal
networked leadership, its formation and process has often caused consternation to outsiders. However, its pattern is exposed as a way that Indigenous people in the community generally conform to and which is able to effect desired outcomes.

I have offered a model of the Port Keats or *Thamarrurr* concept of leadership as a means to conceptualise their hierarchical mode of social relations based on networks and nodes of authority and influence and a system of deferment. This model describes ‘leadership’ in the following ways as:

- inherently founded on Indigenous social constructs, thoughts and institutions;
- reasonably ‘fluid’, negotiable and adaptive to local circumstances in some situations, but constant and knowledgeable (non-negotiable) in others;
- intrinsically acted out in Aboriginal symbolism, religion and land-ownership; and
- reflective of the essential egalitarian nature of the society and individual decision-making rights, and with a capacity for some people to move across contexts.

Further, the model enunciates Indigenous leadership as having developed to a contemporary state where:

- the system is conceptualised within a networked and nodal framework of leaders across communities and regions;
- the system of leadership is based on deferment to others for a range of reasons;
- the networks reflect ‘enduring webs’ of leadership that are able to accommodate and persevere in a midst of ‘shifting alliances and cleavages’ between and amongst leaders (Hunt and Smith 2007: 8);
• nodal-type leadership is enacted that has the capacity to draw together diverse histories, alliances and networks with a propensity to get things done;
• the system has the occasional ‘big-men’ but within a sanctioned network and with an end result that relies on the overall system (the mental construct, the ability to work within the network, the ‘clever-men’ that work with the system, and the ‘thick’ networks that are nurtured and supported by generosity and other reciprocal notions). Such prominent leaders are ‘kept in check’ by the underlyng notion of egalitarianism and individualism that frowns upon domination and suppression;
• leadership has been delegated to certain individuals in order to reproduce and maintain relationships within an intercultural realm. Followers recognise and defer to such leaders;
• leadership is contested from within by the activities of the youth groups; and
• leaders are regularly attempting to engage with non-Indigenous groups, but often fail through joint misunderstandings. This results in misalignment and systematic tension.

Further, I propose a heuristic research framework for understanding how Indigenous leadership is objectified and enacted. I argue that this heuristic, informed by the research, provides a pathway for us to better understand and ‘see’ Indigenous leadership in community, regional and possibly broader contexts. Continuity, as a social and mental construct and as a coping mechanism, is fundamental. However, the heuristic framework developed here incorporates additional considerations that enable a more realistic working model for mutual
understanding and engagement, and a fairer accommodation by mainstream Australia of how Indigenous nations lead and motivate their people.

I believe that it is important for non-Indigenous people to better understand and accommodate the dynamics of Indigenous leadership and their need to cope and manage stress and pressure. However, just as important is the need for Indigenous people to understand the idiosyncrasies of their own leadership construct. It partly underlines the purpose for embarking on such research.
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